



In the defense of postmodernism

Nora Hämäläinen

Är Trump postmodern? [Is Trump postmodern?]

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In her newest book, Finnish philosopher Nora Hämäläinen presents a strong case against the misguided notions that postmodernism should be held responsible for populist and reactionary trends pertaining to science beliefs and culture relativism. The backdrop of her book (as well as the title!) is a now rather widespread belief that the postmodern (posthumanist, poststructuralist) deconstruction and questioning of the coming-into-being processes of general truths is at the heart of the rise of populism, in the post truth era. The reactionist crowd that refuses facts on climate change, or that advances beliefs in creationism are often the same that hold strong conservative stances on migration, abortion, gender and sexuality, especially in the North American context. They represent an anti-intellectualism for which humanists and social scientists appear particularly egregious, but for which scientific authorities in disciplines such as medicine, biology and physics are also commonly rejected. It is claimed that postmodernism has stirred up this angry crowd with its skepticism, irony, or rejection of grand narratives of the past. At the same time, it has provided the crowd with the weapons of “relativism” and politicization of the personal. The agendas of both Trump and other populist groups are seen to plug into a yearning for a social ordering of the past: to times of old industries and the patriarchal nuclear family. To times before people started questioning things.

The first chapters of Hämäläinen’s book conveys a pedagogic grasp on the definition of postmodernism as an intellectual movement and the way it has commonly – and incorrectly – been construed as the source of skeptical questioning of truths and realist knowledge. Her case is not against the angry masses that are reacting against the reflective, liquid nature of postmodernism. It is against academics and intellectuals who may not be their ideologi-

cal or political allies, but nevertheless share the same need for rejection. The intellectual anti-postmodernists are motivated by a need to orient humanity towards a generically classic analytical mode of thinking, sometimes in the name of objectivity and realism. These are also the predominant voices endorsing claims of the harm caused by French thinkers of the 1980s. My own experience is that they are more reactive than creative in their skepticism against the threats of intellectual chaos and pretentious illogical nonsense.

Hämäläinen lays out a division of philosophy within two historical traditions, classic analytical and postmodern, allowing philosophers of signification and society such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida to represent the latter. The daily newspapers' culture and art sections are the landscape in which Hämäläinen has observed negotiation of the influence of postmodernism to take place, over current ideational climates. In these, postmodernism is discussed in its "kultursidesbemärkelse" (page 6, in English: "its signification of the media's cultural section") by figures like *Svenska Dagbladet's* columnist Lena Andersson and other representatives of a 'rational' intellectual establishment, critical against flabby intellectual postmodernist reasoning.

The defence speech

Hämäläinen's strength lies particularly in her ability to present the ways in which the original projects of post structuralism, post modernity and post humanism have been treated unfairly as the source of "relativism", in understandings of responsibility, gender and scientific truths. She argues convincingly for the importance of shifting the scientific gaze, from circumstances of "reality" and the nature of phenomena, towards a consideration of the circumstances in which reality is approached and defined. She is able to articulate the poignant and valuable logical underpinnings that exist at the core of these intellectual projects.

Hämäläinen also argues compellingly for the pertinence of pointing out the weaknesses within dogmatic convictions that surround "objective facts", and denotes that such questioning can further innovative thinking and knowledge within the cracks of contemporary, normative systems of thought. In fact, postmodern epistemology bears close resemblances to the openness and curiosity advanced by the enlightenment movement. Indeed, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard and Michel Foucault all adhered to a very rational and serious approach within knowledge searching but are nevertheless commonly and carelessly lumped together and rejected as "French" and "complicated". This practice captures a typical mistake that appears in critique of Foucault. Hämäläinen skillfully conveys an interesting and all too familiar phenomenon: the frustration of academics in American and British traditions when they come across the language of continental traditions, and how this frustration often leads to an unfair dismissal of important and noteworthy philosophical work.

A good example of such a dismissal is accounted for in chapter 3 in Martha Nussbaum's critique of Judith Butler: Nussbaum's critique of Butler mostly concerns, in Hämäläinen's interpretation, an explanation of how incomprehensible Butler's writing is and a framing of Butler's obscure manner of writing as intentional. But what kind of constructive and intellectually honest dialogue can be upheld when the intensions of the speaker's style of expression becomes an obstacle for taking their suggestions seriously? A clumsy style of expression is a relatively minor offense so long as the thought and reasoning behind it are of great value (which they very much are in this case!). The danger in this case is that Nussbaum runs the errands of an "anti-intellectualism disguised in reason" (p. 77). For Hämäläinen's main point regarding whether doubters of truth and loud reactionists are the result of post-

modernism – let’s call it the “Is Trump postmodern?- dilemma” – this insight is critically important. In her view, there are different types of cultural and intellectual forces actively counteracting reason while claiming to do just the opposite.

It is easy to agree with Hämäläinen’s view that both relativity and objectivity are possible at the same time: “research, education, knowledge inquiry, and rational dialogues mark the foundation for a reasonable societal order. But these dialogues are resilient to more complexity, they need not be simplified to a *for* or *against*” (p 33). A great contribution, for example by feminism and postcolonialism, is that these traditions of questioning normative assumptions have problematized a harmful dichotomy between relativism and objectivism. It is often claimed that relativists don’t believe in objective knowledge, which is a great misconception. We need not give up the construction of objective knowledge, but “what we must give up is the idea about an objective language that can give us access to the world in itself” (p. 42).

While the above are commonly iterated truths among social scientists, they are surely not questions that are discussed in everyday interaction by people living out their day-to-day lives. Science is perceived as a guarantee for accuracy of statements, and when it starts questioning itself people begin to feel unsettled. In the “post truth era”, positioning speakers’ representation of reality from the point of view of their stakeholder interests has become more common. My own view is that we are in many ways living in a time when we are not fixated, in a postmodern (or ‘Baudrillardian’) sense, on formats and styles and distancing ourselves from speakers and circumstances that underpin the creation of text. Instead, spin doctors and trolls on the internet seek out ways to simplify and package utterances and ideas in order to form the public’s opinions in line with their patrons’ goals. . In such a way, this is not postmodernism at all, but a combination of the best parts of postmodern reasoning (“depends on how you look at it” and “presentation format is crucial”), with more classic deduction and clientelist thinking (“of course that person would say that because they will benefit from it themselves”).

Hämäläinen never opens up the landscape and the time in between the contemporary ‘kultursidesopinion’ (art section opinions) and the philosophers that she is discussing. This period is one of changing intellectual and cognitive geographies for the whole society: people, within cognitive capitalist markets, on a daily basis weigh in “realist” and “structuralist” perspectives like never before. These are situations where citizens, politicians, civil servants are faced with choosing how to understand and present matters in a reasonable and morally sound way – ways that both make sense and serve the aims and objectives of their employer, personal ethical views or society at large. These are also practices that “make” the terminology and epistemic adherences relevant and active within our societies.

Missing epistemic machinery

In a relatively early stage of the book I begin to miss an awareness of the role played by social theory, social sciences and social research. I feel that these epistemic cultures have played a central role in the translation and integration of postmodern ideas into the more or less intellectual movements that are now being criticized.

Hämäläinen’s view on research activities and academic disciplines entails a rather old-fashioned outlook: “to research is to order oneself in the bigger entities that disciplines entail” (pp 90). Research institutions – public, private, third sector – are today primarily not ordered around academic disciplines but credibility, reliability and accountability of science, and epistemic claims are made within all sorts of contexts and processes. Only a small share fit into epistemological categories that we teach and reproduce at our universities.

Sectorial and private research institutions have developed their own working processes, which are left out of teaching programs for students at universities and other educational institutions. Notably, ample examples exist of university academics that lack contact or grounding with the logic of societal institutions and their concrete practical empirical work. This in turn may lead them to become tone deaf to a (postmodern) “making” of trends, apparent in society’s institutions, practice and governing epistemologies. Some of the contempt over (poststructuralist) academics may stem from an observation of the gap between universities curriculum and the work of massive information and knowledge production machineries in current societies.

Hämäläinen does not branch out very far from her own philosophy- and culture sections-reading and she does not formulate any hypotheticals of how thought might become truth through praxis. When she discusses Foucault she could, for example, have mentioned how his legacy has – through a long line of scholarly contributions and debates – come to color our views on the formation of true knowledge and how this excludes and includes preferences. I also see a great paradox in that those who criticize Foucault use his own instruments for explaining themselves. This is in many ways a current, metatextual postmodern phenomenon: we employ model explanations without understanding their history. The reflexive postmodern instruments have a life of their own, we take them for granted and use them without context.

The “social theory machinery” is a chapter between the philosophers and the debate of the art section that Hämäläinen might be leaving out in an effort to stick strictly to her scope. Nevertheless, social scientists have, over the years, simplified postmodern thinking into schematic approaches and terminology, sometimes making us – in my opinion – less organic and durable as thinkers and scientists. This machinery functions a bit like when the first-year social science student, who has never come across concepts of sociocultural class performance and opens up a book by Pierre Bourdieu. The discovery of terminology for ‘conducts’ and ‘styles’ doesn’t necessarily make us less schematic in our explanations, and it certainly does not guarantee a humane outlook on people and groups, despite our honest and good intentions.

But who is to be blamed?

Hämäläinen presents a sound case for the fact that postmodernism and our understandings of it today is not what it originally was, meaning that contemporary skeptics criticize a project that has never really existed. A decaying knowledge of, and feel for recognizing, the epistemic machineries of social institutions (professions, service provision logics, the roles played by the rule of law) is likely part of what may be fostering reactionist and populist movements among citizens. In academic contexts they manifest themselves somewhat differently.

In contemporary university milieus, a new way of measuring academic performance is often faulted as hampering our possibilities to take the time to be truly reflective in our research. While I think that a fast pace and production goals are indeed putting pressure on scientific knowledge production, I am not convinced that this is the main problem that exists within our universities. Rather, I believe that the ordering of academic specializations into narrow compartments of disciplines cliques and sub-themes of disciplines, have over time weakened the project of postmodernism. The great postmodernists of the past often represented a mix of philosophy, literary theory, sociology and history. The lack of mixed realist-constructionist scholarly profiles is reflected in the quality of academic “postmodern” analyses.

The question of quality attains its peak in Chapter 5, where Hämäläinen discusses the hoax of theoretical publications that have passed through referee processes, despite being made up pieces mimicking absurd and obscure genre (including article titles such as “The Conceptual Penis as Social Construct”). These hoaxes have revealed a weakness in the social sciences and humanities (postmodern if you like), which Hämäläinen leaves out: intellectuals are deeply ideological and they form self-affirmative cliques.

For sociology this has meant that we tend to prioritize and selectively prescribe more noble intentions and favourable interpretations for the people we cheer for, feel for and whose rights we believe in: migrants, vegetarians, cannabis smokers, or sexual and ethnic minorities. Our conviction that we are standing on the side of society’s most vulnerable, or the morally ‘good’ or modish has made us ignorant to the same types of human traits in Trump-supporters, skinheads and internet trolls. This disparity may, in many ways, be important and legitimate, but it is nevertheless an imbalance that those individuals left outside of our shelters and cliques observe and experience first-hand. For the critique and cultural politics of the art section (‘kulutrsidorna’), this has sometimes led to a greater lenience in assessments of quality for political projects of the ‘right kind’.

By digging into the meat of the problematic qualities espoused by leftist intellectual ideology and academic movements, namely their mechanisms of favoring and prioritization of issues, Hämäläinen could have taken on a more bold and demanding task. Instead, she chooses – for no reason whatsoever – to position herself as “a liberal, left, feminist and non-postmodern philosopher” (page 119). Everything before “non-postmodern” is needless for the objectives of her book (and ironically enough makes her indeed postmodern!!). I am not convinced that “Democratization” is the right heading for the first point in her summary chapter of trends, and now that she has demarcated herself in line with these specific convictions I cannot help but start reading into this chosen word a context that proves the self-sabotaging features of the declaration altogether.

All of my objections and critical remarks here need to be seen primarily as serving as a dialogue with the author's inspiring text. All in all, Nora Hämäläinen has written an important book that I can warmly recommend. She makes a convincing and strong case for her own perspective on the complicated situation people live out today, mired in doubt and mistrust of authorities, and why postmodernism has been drawn in and scapegoated within explanations for this circumstance. The COVID-19 pandemic and the discussion surrounding how to act has unfolded this matter in a very tangible sense. It is indeed far-fetched to trace political articulations of relativity to French theorists of the 1980s, millennials, postcolonialism, feminism etc. It could as much be blamed on many other, equally unrelated, trends.

IS Trump, then, a postmodern phenomenon? He has sensed a social emotion born from the intellectual stratification of people into groups that include those “important to take into consideration and help” and others that are “not all that important to take into consideration and help”. He has drawn nourishment from this artificial division for his political aims and manifestation of power. In this sense, the answer is surely a “yes”. The Trump phenomenon is postmodern, but Hämäläinen’s work shows why he is not postmodernist.