Postmodern Conservatism and Capitalism – On the modern fixation of identity and identity politics

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Conservatives today have been deeply critical of what is often called postmodernism. However, these conservative criticisms distract from powerful social trends which might play a far more significant role in the "production of difference" across society. Postmodern conservatives have failed to see that capitalism itself is the greatest source of social fragmentation and value creation in the world.

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Conservatives today have been deeply critical of what is often called postmodernism. They have associated it with identity politics, political correctness, social justice warriors, relativistic "cultural Marxism" and a host of other evils. For some conservatives, post-modernism is signifies everything that is wrong with contemporary society. University of Toronto Professor Jordan Peterson has characterized it as "dangerous" and "radical" and dismissed important authors like Derrida as "charlatans." The National Security Council has claimed that "postmodern cultural Marxism" (whatever that means) mobilizes opposition to Donald Trump. And right wing commentator Ben Shapiro has characterized Barack Obama the first "postmodern" President.

Moreover, conservative criticisms of postmodern thinking are not relegated to its intellectual claims. They are often directed against specific groups in society that are perceived as promulgating postmodern doctrines. Here, Jordan Peterson, now the number one selling author on Amazon, is perhaps the most articulate and comprehensive right wing critic. He criticizes postmodern theorists and scholars for corrupting the youth of the West with "nihilistic" doctrines that "rip out their ethical foundations." Most particularly, he directs his scorn against postmodernism's most pernicious product: identity politics. Taught that powerful institutions are marginalizing their identity, individuals become "hell-bent" on tearing down apparently oppressive structures without appreciating the valuable service they provide. This leads to growing social fragmentation, a sense of atomistic isolation from all other individuals and groups, and destroys the "substructure of Western Civilization" and its affiliated moral values.

There is much that could be said defending postmodern intellectuals and theory from critics like Peterson. To my mind it is clear that they do not have a particularly robust understanding of most of postmodern doctrines. But here I want to raise another, more direct criticism. Conservative critics often take various social groups who advocate for postmodernism to be responsible for social fragmentation and the alleged collapse of the Western tradition and its values. Apparently a small cabal of university professors, activists, and students, is ripping apart the "substructure" of Western

civilization one Derrida citation at a time. However, these conservative criticisms all have a curious shallowness to them. By directing blame against easily targeted and reviled social groups like intellectuals (and, as we shall see, ethnic minorities), they either miss or distract from more powerful social trends which might play a far more significant role in what David Harvey calls the "production of difference" across society. In this essay, I want to discuss how capitalist societies actually produce the kind of social fragmentation and atomism these conservative critics decry. Moreover, I will suggest that capital plays a fundamental role in the production of what I call "postmodern conservatism."

Capitalism and the Production of Difference

In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels characterized capitalism as a revolutionary mode of social production where "all fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify." In capitalist societies "all that is solid melts into air." This brilliant formulation is tantalizingly rich with insight about the impact capitalism can have in destroying old social relations, replacing them with new ones, and then in turn eliminating those. Later, Marx would elaborate on this position more concretely. In the *Grundrisse* Marx claimed the production of surplus value, the unpaid labor time added to objects which allows them to be commodified and sold at a profit,

"…requires the production of new consumption requires that the consumer circle within circulation expands as did the productive circle previously. Firstly quantitative expansion of existing consumption; secondly, creation of new needs by propagating existing ones in a wide circle; thirdly, production of new needs and discovery and creation of new use values."

What Marx was describing in the *Grundrisse* was nothing less than the origins of social fragmentation taking place on a global scale as capitalism grew in strength. Throughout *Capital* and other works, he elaborates on this theme. Most notably, Marx discusses how the introduction of money as the primary medium of exchange in traditionally oriented societies transforms the way individuals interact within them. From seeing one another as common members of a community, they gradually transform into egoistic and competitive consumers pursuing their own particular desires. In other words, capitalisms and its mediums transformed traditional societies into those characterized by alienated modern individuals concerned only with their own identity and its private satisfactions. Moreover, since all individuals now competed with one another for position and capital, everyone became increasingly concerned with power. Where before power had been relegated to the top of the social hierarchy, in the apparently equal realm of liberal society, everyone was expected to acquire power in order to get ahead.

Years later, David Harvey developed this same idea geographically, vividly describing how capital both creates new geographies only to tear them down shortly after. Capital produces a new set of factories, service centres, and centres of production to create new moral values. This is its moment of greatest triumph—capital has successfully eliminated the old in order to market and sell the new. But what Harvey calls the "paradox" inherent in this process is that these same centres of productions then post a barrier to the development of new ones designed to create new economic and by extension moral values. So eventually capital tears down the very geography of the old to build the new, transforming landscapes and communities as it goes.

We can develop this line of thinking even further. Capitalism must inevitably destroy old moral values in order to continuously create new ones through what Joseph Schumpeter called a process of "creative destruction." It has no use for traditional mores, since they pose a barrier to the creation

of new values and the set of commodities affiliated with them. Moreover, I would claim that since we frame our identity in relation to the world around us, these new values and commodities lead to social fragmentation through the creation of new identities. Capitalism establishes new ways of being in the world, commodifies them, and gradually dissolves the social fabric that once existed in more homogenous traditional societies. Moreover, in an accelerating attempt to destroy space through time (as Harvey puts it), modern global capitalism also brings the world closer together, unbalancing the traditional legitimacy and identity of the "nation-state." It does this through moving factories from the developed to the developing world to take advantage of low labour costs, relocating private assets to off shore tax free havens, or creating zones for the "free" movement of labour such as the European Union, and a host of other trends.

The power of these movements is undeniable. But as we have seen recently, there has been a dramatic pushback against these trends. Some of this has come from the left. But in the final section of this article, I will try to account for how capitalism precipitates the rise of what I am calling "postmodern conservatism." Postmodern conservatism is highly dangerous because, rather than critically examining the root causes of social fragmentation in capitalist processes, it directs its rage against the most vulnerable in society.

Postmodern Conservatism

Post-modern conservatism draws on the philosophical heritage of Edmund Burke, Joseph De Maistre, Lord Devlin, Michael Oakshott, and other conservatives. These figures located the root of social fragmentation not in capitalism and social processes but in the ideology of liberal rationalism. They argued that liberal ideology, developed and disseminated by intellectuals fascinated with abstractions, were establishing a world where respect for traditional society and its values was being abandoned. In its place, they erected a kind of atomistic individualism, where each person was concerned to pursue their own desires without interference from others or respect for traditional values. As the late Robert Bork—Ronald Reagan's erstwhile favorite for the Supreme Court—put it, progressive liberals had no interest in "particularity-respect for difference, circumstance, history, and the irreducible complexity of human beings and human societies." Against this, these classically conservative thinkers argued that individuals should respect traditional authority and be distrustful of pretentious "rational" intellectuals.

There are virtues to this intellectual tradition; for instance, Edmund Burke's staunch criticism of imperialism based on its tendency to destroy long standing cultures and traditions. However, these virtues are not shared by post-modern conservatism, which is the contemporary bastardization of this right wing intellectual tradition, vastly empowered through modern technologies such as digital media and deeply radicalized. Emerging largely on the internet in in the mid-2000s, postmodern conservatism embodies what Wendy Brown characterizes as a politics of resentment. It aggressively denounces allegedly "progressive" doctrines formulated by intellectual elites who claim to have some privileged understanding that lets them arbitrate issues of facts and values with objectivity. Against this, post-modern conservatism radicalizes the positions of Burke, Oakshott, Bork and others that the traditional "common sense" understanding of the heartland should be taken as authoritative. It is the average person in the heartland, the man on the "Clapham omnibus" to invoke Lord Devlin, whose moral values should be accepted as authoritative. Not because his values are demonstrably more valid. Postmodern conservatism, with its reverence for "alternative facts," its dismissal of different opinions as "fake news," and its distrust of intellectuals, has shown little concern for epistemic validity. Postmodern conservatives want their values accepted because that is what tradition dictates and what most "regular" people value (though apparently not enough to win a majority of votes in the United States).

Conclusion: The Roots of Postmodern Conservatism in Capitalist Processes

This is in part what makes postmodern conservatism so dangerous. Postmodern conservatism blames unpopular “elite” groups like intellectual and marginalized communities such as LGBTQ groups and ethnic minorities drawn to developed countries with the promise of jobs for the fragmentation of society. In practice, this means that post-modern conservatives have mobilized ethnic identity to push for a retrenchment of tradition, and its affiliated moral values, against the demands of both liberals who believe in objective truth and post-modern leftists who want a more pluralistic society. The irony here being, of course, that postmodern conservatives have developed their own form of identity politics. Postmodern conservatives such as Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, or “illiberal” democrats such as Janos Ader of Hungary, have directed the outrage produced by social fragmentation against vulnerable identities who allegedly don’t belong. Against the power of globalizing capitalist trends, they have demanded a return to a kind of state oriented corporatism in which national capital is insulated from global competition by putting restrictions on competition, foreign goods, and the “free” movement of labour through immigration. This, combined with repressive domestic policies clamping down on progressive groups and “alien” identities, is meant to abet social fragmentation and help postmodern conservatives feel great again.

Postmodern conservatives have failed to see that capitalism itself is the greatest source of social fragmentation and value creation in the world. The attempts to insulate national capital from globalization, even if successful, cannot stop this trend. It is inherent in the nature of capital to revolutionize society in a manner conducive to accumulation through the creation of new moral values and the destruction of the old. Moreover, postmodern conservatives fail to see that they themselves are the product of such trends. Indeed, as Harvey, Brown and others have observed, the modern fixation of identity and the emphasis on identity politics is itself partly the product of capitalism. Through establishing a society in which alienated individuals are seen as responsible for pursuing their private pleasure in competition with others, the political mobilization of identity can become a locus for pursuing social power. In some cases this can be an extraordinarily progressive effect—for instance, when historically marginalized groups push for an “equal share of the pie.” However, in the case of postmodern conservatives, capitalism, combined with new digital technologies, has wrought a cabal of truth- denying nationalists aggressively pushing for the retrenchment of their traditional identity, values, and authority. These are the same values and positions of authority which capital itself helped dissolve while maintaining the basic hierarchy integral to capitalism.

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P.S.

* “Postmodern Conservatism and Capitalism”. New Politics. April 5, 2018: http://newpol.org/content/postmodern-conservatism-and-capitalism