

Postmodern Openings

ISSN: 2068 – 0236 (print), ISSN: 2069 – 9387 (electronic)

Coverd in: Index Copernicus, Ideas RePeC, EconPapers, Socionet,
Ulrich Pro Quest, Cabel, SSRN, Appreciative Inquiry Commons,
Journalseek, Scipio, CEEOL,
EBSCO

Impure Postmodernity -- Philosophy Today

David KOLB

Postmodern Openings, 2012, Volume 3, Issue 2, June, pp: 7-17

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://postmodernopenings.com>

Published by:

Lumen Publishing House

On behalf of:

Lumen Research Center in Social and Humanistic Sciences

Impure Postmodernity -- Philosophy Today

David KOLB¹

Abstract:

This essay discusses the situation of philosophy today in an era of mixed modern, postmodern, and traditional values and social patterns. It argues, with reference to postmodern architecture and to the German philosophers Hegel and Heidegger, that we should reject polarizing conceptual dualities, and that we need to seek out new kinds of less centered and less hierarchical unities that take advantage of the internal tensions and spacings within intellectual and cultural formations. It concludes with a discussion of the promises and problems of dialogue between Eastern and Western philosophies in today's world.

Keywords:

modern, postmodern, philosophy, architecture, Hegel, Heidegger

¹ David KOLB - Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Bates College, Lewiston ME USA, Residence: 841 W 36th Avenue, Eugene OR 97405 USA, Email Address: Davkolb@gmail.com, <http://www.dkolb.org>

Today, Modern and Postmodern

We live in a puzzling time when elements of rational enlightenment modernity mingle with reactions that vary from forceful reaffirmations of ancient traditions to confident proclamations of a postmodern age. Sometimes it seems we are replaying old controversies, and sometimes that we are wandering into new terrain where the old maps give little guidance².

Our world -- as we struggle to create a shared and equal dialogue that would make it "our" world -- tries to understand its situation through concepts such as *modernity* and *postmodernity*. These are not just labels; they represent long labors of thought that tried to grasp in what ways recent modes living no longer stay within the more fixed horizons of traditional societies. Is it just that the rate of change and reinterpretation has increased, or are there new kinds of societies and institutions, new identities, selves, and thoughts?

My first book (Kolb 1987) concentrated on the term *modern* and its implications in Hegel and Heidegger, and their complex approval and critique of modernity. Then, I began to use the term *postmodern*. I wrote another book that dealt with postmodernism in the theory of knowledge and in architectural theory (Kolb 1990). Now, though, the term *postmodern* has acquired so many meanings that it is not as useful as it once was.

In architecture (one of its original contexts in English)³ the term *postmodern* started by naming a liberating reaction against what were perceived as the narrow strictures of orthodox modernist architecture. Then the term acquired positive content as a reassertion of particular local cultures and historical styles, sometimes serious and often ironic. Then the term was narrowed down to ironic historicist surface decoration for modern boxes. Now it often functions as a term of abuse in architectural discourse, labeling buildings that seen to be dominated by

² This article is a revised and expanded version of a preface published in Chinese for the 2004 translation of Kolb 1986.

³ Before it was applied to architecture, the word "postmodern" was used with different meanings in the 1930s by Spanish literary critics and in the 1940s by Arnold Toynbee.

an easy consumerism.⁴ Also, whether from older artistic traditions or from a resurgent modernists, there has come a reassertion of the "purity" of architecture and the value of abstraction.

In the other arts the situation has been too complex to be caught by any simple dichotomy between modern and postmodern. In fiction and poetry and painting and cinema, the line between the strong modernist and the postmodernist has never been so clear as it was in architecture. One could say that postmodern novels became fragmented and ironic, while postmodern paintings mixed media and crossed genre boundaries. But there are few clear lines separating modernists such as Joyce or Beckett from postmodernists such as Pynchon or Calvino. And Dada and Surrealism can be called either modernist or postmodernist; the distinction is not very useful. Indeed, Lyotard could confidently say that the postmodern was that part of the modern that abandoned the solace of good form and the ideal of harmony or totality (Lyotard 1984). It is true, too, that both the postmodern and the modern share the goal of removing barriers to the expansion of human possibilities.

In philosophy the term postmodern has become associated with deconstruction and other "French" movements that are taken by their proponents to liberate selves, communities, and bodies from the oppressions of modern rational or bureaucratic totalities. Rationality, transparency, autonomy, control, progress -- the values of the Enlightenment -- are not so much denied as deconstructed. That is, their pretensions to absoluteness and totality are questioned and they are located within a field of other values and activities that they can no longer be taken as defining or dominating (Melville 1986).

To this is often added the claim that while society and persons cannot live in a state of pure fluidity and some structures and processes are needed, creating structure is an exercise of power in an act of decision that cannot be the result of any rational calculation or algorithm (which is not to say that it is context-free or may not be strategically

⁴ For the varying fortunes of "postmodern" as a term in architecture, see Venturi 1966 and Jencks 1977 for the glory days of complex coding, Portoghesi 1983 and Jencks 1987 for the turn to historicism, and Jameson 1983, Calinescu 1987, Frampton 1987, Casey 1993 and Harries 1997 for negative reactions. The other arts do not have such clear positive to negative trajectories for the word.

useful). Here postmodern analyses join with the identity politics and liberations that stem from older (and still "modernist") movements such as Marxism, and from Nietzschean and psychoanalytic cultural studies, which refuse to take the socially given or the "natural" at face value. So, places and buildings and arts and cultural movements have been described as postmodern if they make room for decentered fluid identities for selves and bodies and communities, whether that is seen as a positive or negative accomplishment. Their proponents see them as bringing new freedom and creativity.

In philosophy as in the arts, there have been strong reactions against ideas and cultural-political movements named by the term *postmodern*. They can be seen by critics as at best frivolous play when serious analysis is needed, and at worst a nihilistic degeneration of identity and community by a vicious relativism and refusal of rationality and shared values.

The debates about postmodernism have acquired a totalizing character that obscures insight by demanding that we align ourselves with one or the other extreme. There is much that is good and liberating about postmodernist attempts to multiply and question the absoluteness of unities. The older "classical" modes of central unity in society, economy, self, art, and thought are being rightly challenged. But we need concepts for new modes of unity that are less oppressive yet still acknowledge our interdependence and co-creation.

Today, Hegel and Heidegger

This is why in our puzzling situation, we might want to review two past German thinkers. For all the attacks that he has suffered, Hegel remains relevant today. Hegel's ideas about mutual recognition need to be restated in new ways today. Despite his personal Eurocentrism, Hegel tries to develop a philosophy that does not begin from any particular national or traditional foundation. His is one of the first and still one of the most sophisticated attempts to create a philosophy that refuses any foundation that must be simply accepted as a given first principle or primary datum. Hegel combines this with the attempt to deliver concrete insight into many fields of life. His discussions of the relation of the state and the economy, his acknowledgment of the liberating role of markets

along with his refusal to equate human welfare with market efficiency, his investigations of the condition of art in the modern world, his way of avoiding the extremes of individualism and collectivism, his studies of the nature of thought and of philosophy, all these remain important.

In a similar fashion Heidegger remains relevant. Despite his personal and political failings, his is perhaps the most sophisticated way of coming close to Hegel while differing profoundly from him. He too examines individual and community, the status of art, and the nature of thought and philosophy. He probes the nature of technological society, and even if, as I think, his ideas about technology and society are flawed, he has still inspired other more nuanced critiques.

Hegel and Heidegger and their mutual confrontation are important for understanding our modern and postmodern situation. Besides their general influence, they have affected the expansion of Marxist thought into varieties of critical theory. They, together with Nietzsche, are basic background to more recent thinkers such as Derrida, who like Heidegger finds himself caught in a nearness-distance tension with Hegel, and Deleuze, who while deeply and resolutely anti-Hegelian still faces many of the same issues.

Comparing Hegel and Heidegger I argued that we can accept neither Hegel's full self-transparency nor Heidegger's mystifying history of being and his totalizing attack on technology. We should be alert for the ways in which new unities and new modes of self and community are coming to be.

We are left to make our way with impure cognitive tools, always re-interpreting ourselves and our categories. That process has necessary conditions and forms that can be reflected on in something like Hegel's manner, but without achieving the detailed substantive guidance that he derives from such reflection⁵.

We cannot forsake the "modern" aim of widening the field of available individual and social possibilities. It is not just that we should not do so, but that we are unable to do so without falling into bad faith. The awareness of alternatives cannot be erased, though it can be hidden or obscured by various forceful maneuvers.

⁵ Kolb 1996 and 1999 discuss ways Hegel and Heidegger try to derive concrete statements about history from their global reflections. See also Heidegger 1981.

The postmodern attack on centered unities is often accompanied by a rhetoric of fragmented identities, masks, irony, play, inner distances and tearings. Insofar as this is a letting go of restrictions it is, despite its anti-Enlightenment rhetoric, a continuation of the Enlightenment that Kant defines as a freedom from self-(and other)-imposed tutelage.

It can, though, be read as avoiding substantive commitments and the "serious" business of life. But both Hegel and Heidegger are extremely "serious" philosophers opposed to ironic living, and yet each tries to think kinds of inner distances and inner disunities within self and society, so they may have things to teach us as we try to work out new modes of de-centered selfhood and community.

There is a process of self-reinterpretation and self-construction with no core unity doing the process. Unities and centers emerge within the process; they do not dominate it, and they are never totally successful, whether in society or in the self. Hegel and Heidegger are in deep dispute about the kind of reflection that philosophy needs to think these disunities and internal tensions.⁶

Today, Eastern and Western Philosophy

One of the major ways we become aware of new possibilities today is in the encounter with global societies and traditions that can no longer be treated, as Hegel did, as less developed than the European. Hegel's knowledge of India and China was limited to the sources available at the time, and in his philosophy of history Hegel combined the apparently unchanging quality of Chinese civilization with his own theories of development. For him China was a spatially separate civilization frozen at an earlier temporal stage of development, as were India and Persia and, in a different way, Africa.

Hegel's totalizing pictures of these societies, as of his European nations, cannot stand against their internal differences and dynamisms. But there is a danger in some postmodern thinking that simply denies classical modes of unity. This postmodernism may try to fragment large unities, such as China or France, into smaller unities, perhaps regions or cities or classes or sexual preference groupings. But these, in turn, will

⁶ Kolb 2008 takes up these issues when it discusses the idea of "place" and describes the decentered, linked unities and ongoing self-remaking in cities and suburbs today.

fragment, and soon even the individual begins to fragment into a Nietzschean or Deleuzean crowd of desires and events. There is something right about this pursuit of difference, but unless handled with an eye for commonalities and new types of non-classical unities-in-difference, it fails as a basis for mutual dialogue or political action. Hegel and Heidegger try to think such new kinds of mutual unities and multiplicities, though with mixed success.

Global encounter in philosophy can open us to new kinds of unity and multiplicity. The problems of unity and difference appear in world philosophy. But the standard duality of Eastern versus Western philosophy needs to be questioned, since both of these supposed large traditions are themselves riven with differences. Western philosophy breaks into many groups and lineages, some fighting, some ignoring each other. Eastern philosophy is even less unified, since the term includes several separate great traditions.

What lends some unity to the image of large unified philosophical blocs is that the varied components of, for example, Chinese philosophy have been in dialogue and dispute with one another for a long time. This does not lead to agreement, but it helps to locate themes and questions of mutual concern, though the degree of commonality is often overestimated. While there was some contact between Chinese and Western philosophy before the twentieth century, dialogue has increased steadily. Now, that dialogue must expand.

Unfortunately there are traps along this path. One is the reduction of confrontation to show-and-tell exhibition: speakers get up and say "this is how we deal with that topic in Confucian (or Hindu or Greek or American) philosophy," showing off their possessions with little attempt to confront the alternatives or to question themselves. The other trap is conversion, where a person or group from one lineage moves completely into another. Little islands of Hindu philosophy appear in America; philosophy departments in Japan become mini Oxfords or Harvards.

Both of these dangers are emphasized when one treats philosophy more like religion, as a matter of giving testimony and seeking conversion to a received body of wisdom. Philosophical activity ought to be self-examination and self-criticism and argument in dialogue. We should hope that the resources of the various traditions will be

brought into global dialogue, and that all participants will be open to questioning the others, and to having their own positions challenged.

Some of my colleagues have argued that the Chinese and Indian traditions are not well equipped for such dialogue because they are more concerned with handing down a received body of wisdom than with argumentative self-criticism of that wisdom. These colleagues say that while argumentation may be used with great subtlety to defend and elaborate the received wisdom, as in Buddhist logic or Neo-Confucian debate, the received wisdom itself is not subject to argumentative challenge.

It is true that with Socrates Western philosophy began by rejecting any received wisdom and seeking rationally acceptable conclusions that needed no traditional backing. Yet this is not totally absent in other traditions. The disputes among the schools of Neo-Confucianism are about the core message of Confucius, not about details. The disputes between Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhists concern the Buddha's basic teachings. It is true that these disputes presume that there is a received core to be transmitted, and that the masters are not treated as irreverently as is common in Western philosophy. On the other hand, what actually happens is a process of self-criticism, carried out in part through argument and in part by rival interpretation of texts, as in the Confucian case, or by the production of rival texts, as in the Buddhist. And when rival schools do not share so much, for example Vedanta and Carvaka in India, then the kind of argument that goes on is not too distinguishable from the Socratic methods.

Philosophy is paradoxically always trying to be more than it is, always trying to examine and state its own limits, refusing to be the handmaid of a fixed tradition and a fixed language. The search for absolute certainty and sure foundations in philosophy has been increasingly criticized since the early nineteenth century. But that does not mean an easy relativism, where philosophy settles down in a socially dictated role. Today more and more philosophers, whether or not they call themselves postmodern, recognize the need for expanded methods that involve radical questioning, while also reinterpreting older texts. There is a complex interplay between argument's inherence in a shared language, *and* a movement of thought that goes beyond and examines its

own rootedness. For living that combination of roots and refusals, history and openness, both Hegel and Heidegger have skills to teach us, though we must deal with them according to our own times and conditions.

References:

- Calinescu, M., (1987) *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, USA.
- Casey, E., S., (1993) *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington IN, USA.
- Frampton, K., (1987) *Ten Points on an Architecture of Regionalism: A Provisional Polemic*, Center 3:20-27, Rizzoli, New York, USA.
- Harries, K., (1997) *The Ethical Function of Architecture*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, USA.
- Heidegger, M., (1981) Only a God Can Save Us. Translated by William Richardson. In Sheehan, T., (1981) *Heidegger: The Man and His Thought*, Precedent, Chicago IL, USA, pp. 45–72.
- Jameson, F., (1983) Postmodernism and Consumer Society. In Foster, H., (1983) *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, The Bay Press Port Townsend WA, USA, pp. 111-125.
- Jencks, C., (1977) *The Language of Postmodern Architecture*, Rizzoli, New York, USA.
- Jencks, C., (1987) *Post-Modernism: The New Classicism in Art and Architecture*, Rizzoli, New York, USA.
- Kolb, D., (1987) *The Critique of Pure Modernity: Hegel, Heidegger, and After*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago IL, USA. (Chinese translation, 2004.)
- Kolb, D., (1990) *Postmodern Sophistications: Philosophy, Architecture, and Tradition*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago IL, USA.
- Kolb, D., (2008) *Sprawling Places*, University of Georgia Press, Athens GA, USA. (Also as a book-length hypertext at <http://www.dkolb.org/sprawlingplaces>.)
- Kolb, D., (1999) Circulation and Constitution at the End of History, in Comay, R., McCumber, J., (1999) *Endings: Questions of Memory in*

- Hegel and Heidegger*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, USA, pp. 57-76.
- Kolb, D., (1996) *Circulation Bound: Hegel and Heidegger on the State*, in Langsdorf, L., Watson, S. H., Bower, E. M., (1996) *Phenomenology, Interpretation, and Community*, SUNY Press, Albany NY, USA.
- Liotard, J., F., (1984) *The Postmodern Condition*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN, USA.
- Melville, S., W., (1986) *Philosophy Beside Itself: On Deconstruction and Modernism*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN, USA.
- Portoghesi, P., (1983) *Postmodern: The Architecture of the Postindustrial Society*, New York: Rizzoli, New York, USA.
- Venturi, R., (1966) *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA.

Biography:

David Kolb

Charles A. Dana Professor Emeritus of Philosophy Bates College, Lewiston ME USA, Residence: 841 W 36th Avenue, Eugene OR 97405 USA, Davidkolb@gmail.com, <http://www.dkolb.org>

Selected publications:

Kolb, David. (1987) *The Critique of Pure Modernity: Hegel, Heidegger, and After*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago IL, USA. (Chinese translation, 2004.)

Kolb, David. (1990) *Postmodern Sophistications: Philosophy, Architecture, and Tradition*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago IL, USA.

Kolb, David. (2008) *Sprawling Places*. University of Georgia Press, Athens GA, USA. (Also as a book-length hypertext at <http://www.dkolb.org/sprawlingplaces>.)

Kolb, David. (2011) *Outside and in: Hegel on natural history*, in *Poligrafi* (number 61-62, volume 16, 2011), pp. 27-43. Online at http://poligrafi.nova-revija.si/revije/Online_Intl2011_NaturalHistory.pdf.

Kolb, David. (2008) Darwin Rocks Hegel: Does Nature have a History?, *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain*, Nos. 57/57, 2008, pp. 97-116.

Kolb, David. (2000) Why Hegel? Why Now?, Introductory essay to the Hegel issue, *Dialogue XXXIX* (2000), pp. 651-6. (with Suzanne Foisy)

Kolb, David. (1999) Circulation and Constitution at the End of History, in Comay, Rebecca and McCumber, John (1999) *Endings: Questions of Memory in Hegel and Heidegger*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, USA, pp. 57-76.

Kolb, David. (1996) Circulation Bound: Hegel and Heidegger on the State, in Langsdorf, L., Watson, S. H., Bower, E. M., (1996) *Phenomenology, Interpretation, and Community*, SUNY Press, Albany NY, USA.

Kolb, David. (1995) Raising Atlantis: The Later Heidegger and Contemporary Philosophy, in Babich, Babette, (1995) *From Phenomenology to Thought, Errancy, and Desire*, Kluwer, Amsterdam, pp. 55-69.

Kolb, David. (1991a) What is Open and What is Closed in the Philosophy of Hegel? *Philosophical Topics*, vol. 19, no. 2, Fall 1991, pp. 29-50.

Kolb, David. (1991b) Heidegger at 100, in America," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 1991, pp. 140-151.