

Is the future going to be “Meta-modern”?

We know about the past because we have lived through a bit of it, and if we want to know any more we can read someone else’s account of it. E.H.Carr in “What is History” (1961) asserted that there is no such thing as an unbiased and neutral account of history; the facts of history are the facts that historians have chosen to focus on. He also thought that the internet was rewiring our brains! History is always written by the winners – isn’t it? Hegel (1770-1831) thought that history was understandable and was to be discerned through a pattern, basically the consciousness of freedom. Progress, he thought, would be marked by whether we enjoy more freedom now than in the past. He asserted that direction in history is the liberation of the individual spirit and the articulation and growth of the “world spirit” or “Welt Geist.”

Modernism was a movement of ideas, art and architecture that took root in the west and emanated from the seeming supremacy of science and technology which promised a utopia of ever-increasing affluence, leisure and human progress. By the 1960s “post-modernism” became the prevailing idea, rejecting the certainty and universalism that science had promised. Post-modernism was (is) characterized by uncertainty. Friedrich Nietzsche wrote “Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions.” Jacques Derrida in the 1960s questioned whether we could ever get a clear meaning of things as language itself is unreliable!” I think he meant that it is never fixed in a way that allows us to effectively determine a universal meaning. An example might be – take two opposites “Male and Female”. When I was born in 1945 (Modernist) the binary option of sexuality was the norm. Now, for many people sexuality is regarded as a spectrum – take your pick from 22 different types, and the list is growing.

So, having lived through modernism and post-modernism, the question is what will replace these concepts? There seems to be a consensus about “Meta-modernism” from the Greek “meta” meaning between or beyond.

I began with a short account of history because that’s where we tend to look to discern social processes and change. The Post-modern view of history tended to align itself with Michel Foucault’s view that historical “truths” were a reflection of the power relations within society, so any sort of objective truth is impossible, and we are left with subjective feelings and opinions. Test it for yourself:

Was colonialism good for those societies that Britain colonized?

Was the enrichment we enjoyed from being the first country to industrialise done at the expense of communities now suffering disproportionately from the effects of climate change?

Possible answers to these two questions will rely on you making assumptions about progress. The present government was elected on a single word “change” dependent on another single word “growth” (two if you include economic!). But factor in climate change, A.I., the known unknowns about a changing and challenging world order, and you can come up with a very large number of possibilities.

For me, the event that stands out in the post-modern world is the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 – proclaimed by the Japanese/American Economic Historian Francis Fukuyama as “The End of History.”

What he meant was that the socio-political movements of Fascism and Soviet Communism had failed – the future was settled – Liberal Democracy linked to Democratic Capitalism. For Vladimir Putin it was the “greatest geo-political disaster ever”. For Xi Jinping it was time to do a bit of thinking and write “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” (£86.59 from Amazon!) which focused on reform and the opening up of the Chinese economy. Add on the Internet, social media, the rise of surveillance, environmental degradation, climate breakdown, unprecedented movements of people, a war of attrition in Ukraine, a war in Gaza that provokes demonstrations throughout the world – I’m sure you can add plenty more of your own. We also have a new vocabulary in the capitalist world – precariat, zero-hours contracts etc... Something else which politicians are very reluctant to speak about is the true scale of our indebtedness. The National Debt is currently £2.8 Trillion or £2,800,000,000,000, which equates to £37,900 for each citizen of the UK.

Black Mountain College in Talgarth is concentrating on presenting a vision of the future which means embracing “Systems Change”. You won’t be surprised to hear me say it’s a really complex concept, but requires us to look afresh at policies, practices, relationships, power-dynamics, beliefs, ideologies – in other words we need to search for new ways of organizing society, but remember, any talk or reorganizing society is risky. Many people in Russia embraced a utopian vision of societal change in 1917 and got the Gulag.

As a self-proclaimed socialist the future does not look good, but you may have a different view – is it meta-modern?

Philosophy is about ideas. John Maynard Keynes (1883 – 1946) grappled with a world embracing modernism and recognized that there had to be a change in the way governments related to the social and economic wellbeing of the people. I leave you with a pithy quote from my hero:

“But soon or late, it is ideas, not vested interests which are dangerous for good or ill.”