

Postmodernism and Implications for Business and the Marketplace

Introduction.

Every society is an organizational expression of humanity's deep desire to overcome the limits imposed by time and space. We create organizations to perpetuate ourselves.

In medieval times, skilled craftsmen and chemists attempted to turn lead into gold and to mix chemicals with fire to discover the secret elixir that would lead to everlasting life. During the industrial age, the focus turned to the building of the perfect machine capable of perpetual motion and able to run by itself forever. The age we now live in is no different, fueled by the new technologies of information communication, the life sciences and in particular, genetic engineering. We are seeking to construct a society after our own image informed by prevailing views of nature, human nature and the meaning of life.

Currently, in developing and developed societies, there are 3 dominant world-views.

- a) A deity-centered creationist view, largely influenced by Christianity
- b) Charles Darwin's theory of the Origin and development of Species
- c) New emerging Post-modern view(s)

Some broadly view these in the context of pre-modern, modern and post-modern eras, each reflecting a specific historical major economic and social revolution in human civilisation. Thus, Pre-modern (Western) ideas of Man reflected a feudalistic expression of Judaeo-Christian beliefs; Modern views reflect the influence of the Scientific project and the advent of the Industrial Age; while Postmodern views are based on Social Constructionist assumptions.

1. Pre-modern View of Man

The basic tenet of this worldview was the idea that the created universe was a hierarchy in which all created beings were assigned a proper rank and station. Nature then consists of a hierarchy of obligations and mutual dependence, populated by many creatures, differing among themselves in gradation of intellect, in form and in species. This was congenial with the feudal notion of status. Within such a feudal hierarchy, every member had his proper rank with its attendant rights and duties. This characterisation of nature bears a striking likeness to institutional analysis in medieval Europe where a tightly defined social structure ensures dutiful performance by every individual of a complex set of mutual obligations within a rigidly maintained hierarchical setting.

2. Modern View.

The modernist view is that humans as Homo autonomous are independent, self-reliant, self-centering and self-integrating rational subjects. It promotes the selfhood of unrealistic and unjustified optimism. This view emerged during the Enlightenment, and is associated with the displacement of superstition, religion and traditions by scientific knowledge and technology leading to industrialization and social progress, the emergence of the democratic nation state, universal franchise and progressive secularization. Freed from the control of ecclesiastical authority and the imposition of identity by a rigid medieval social order, the modern person is found to be a self-made subject. Armed with the tools of modern science and technology, the heroic modern individual can transform the world of objects into subjects of the human kingdom, serving the human sovereign and yielding its riches for human economic self-aggrandisement.

3. Postmodern Views

The rise of postmodernism had led to the view that Man has no fixed centre but is actually an infinitely malleable self, capable of taking on an indefinite array of imprinted identities. To postmodernists, there are no over-riding meta-narratives or universal truths, only playful options and socio-culturally constructed scripts and myths. An objective reality is giving way to 'perspective realities'. Homo Autonomous is giving way to a person as being in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction. Since there is no

essential Me, it follows that I can be whatever I construct myself to be in terms of personality, area of expertise, appearance., depending on the roles, costumes, setting and how we want to project ourselves to the world.

Postmodernists want to celebrate decentered self, otherwise despair may set in. Recall Bertrand Russell's comment about Modern Man's need for 'confident despair', instead of crying over split milk.

In brief, Postmodernism has decentered self, ethics and society

4. The Prevailing (Hypermodern?) View.

Current views of Man and the nature of Man interpret postmodern ideas through the lens of the new findings and writings of numerous scientists in various sciences, especially the life and information sciences. In this view, all living things are patterns that perpetuate themselves. Life once thought of as God's handiwork, then as a random process guided by an invisible hand of natural selection, is now viewed as an artistic medium of creative advance into novelty. What has brought about this transformation of views? The writings of two persons helped lay the foundation and molded the current thinking on the nature of man and self

- a) Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy provides the philosophical vision for a new approach to biological evolution
 - Nature consists of patterns of activity interacting with other patterns of activity
 - This interaction is governed by the principle of 'anticipation and response' where interacting organisms are constantly anticipating the future and making choices on how to respond to it.
 - In the process each organism exhibits some degree of purpose or aim. It is a goal-setting organism with a 'mind' responding to environmental changes in ways to enhance its survival.
- b) N. Wiener's Cybernetic Theory provides the scientific framework.
 - Information feedback and information processing helps organisms to anticipate and respond to changes
 - A living organism is not a permanent form but a network of activity
 - Organisms are in formation, works in progress, becoming rather than being
 - Negative feedback leads to stasis (maintenance, status quo), positive feedback leads to transformation
 - Organisms are 'dissipative structures' maintaining their structure by the continual flow of energy through their system. Negative feedback helps it to adjust to small fluctuations to maintain homeostasis.
 - Where big fluctuations threaten to destabilise the structure, the system may collapse or re-organise itself by positive feedback.
 - This will lead to a transformation to a new dissipative structure of higher complexity and integration.
 - Evolution this becomes the steady advance to increased complexity of organisation with greater improvement in information processing.
- c) It is interesting to note that the philosopher, Immanuel Kant, had earlier (in his Critique of Judgment) ascribed order, purpose and evidence of design not to nature or to the world as it is, but to patterns read into it by the mind. Hence it no longer seemed necessary to presuppose some intelligent ground for this sense of intelligible order beyond the 'modern' self. Whereas previously it seemed irrational to ascribe order to mere chance, Kant now diagnosed 'the formal purposiveness of nature as a transcendental principle of judgment'.
- d) Thus, rather than organisms being passive, static, mechanistically-assembled beings from the random process of natural selection, dynamic self-organising processes are moving the

organism towards coherent emergent wholes. Such an evolutionary process in creative, random, selective, self-organising survival has to do with gathering information about the environment and responding appropriately towards increase computational ability

- e) In this way, nature is cast in the image of the computer and the language of physics chemistry, mathematics and the information sciences.
- f) This new thinking about evolution parallels new ways commerce is being organised in the network-based global economy.

Implications for the Marketplace

This prevailing view of things thus form the backdrop against which a postmodern consumer culture emerges, where different products and services are sought for their 'consuming' delights. It moves us away from a conceptualization of society and organisations in terms of 'assembly lines' and mass production with their ideas of the assembly of uniform, interchangeable parts into wholes. Now we think in terms of networks in which everything is interrelated and must be viewed and organised as wholes and integrated systems. Technological innovations become socially constructed projections of a particular world view, nurtured by market forces and made current, relevant and socially accepted by the prevailing social milieu.

At the same time, there is emphasis on consumer freedom of choice, where the marketplace is a buffet.smorgasbord/tim-sum environment and we get to choose dishes according to colour, taste, satisfaction, and price, rather than according to their nutritional value and a balanced diet.

Here are some implications of this profound re-inventing of society

- Our adjustment to the world around us depends upon the informational windows that our senses provide.
- Cybernetics has become the primary methodological approach for organising economic and social activity.
- Corporations are now thought of as information systems embedded in networks of relationships. They receive both negative and positive feedback from the marketplace, process the information and 'learn' to adjust or transform their performance.

We are now in the midst of what some call the 'Creative Age', characterized by unlimited consumer choice. new technologies both in information communications and the life sciences make possible the creation of the ultimate consumer playground, with the freedom to mold our own biological endowment and the rest of nature in accordance with whatever script we choose to write. We have the almost godlike power to select the biological futures and features of the many beings who come after us. This must surely be the greatest shopping experience of all time.

A new vocabulary of words and terms are emerging to describe the options and socially constructed futures available to us.

A 'perspective' reality now replaces the idea of an 'objective reality'. The idea that future states are subject to ironclad laws of causality is giving way to the belief that the future is a trajectory of 'creative possibilities'; 'deterministic' outcomes are replaced by 'likely scenarios'; 'permanent' truths by what works (performativity is the rule). These ideas and concepts are those of a creator, an architect and a designer. This shift from an 'industrious' age to a 'creative' age moves the focus from production output to consumerism. Goods are valued for what they mean as much as for their use and people seem to find meaning in the very act of consumption. Advertising and product image take

centre stage and are goods in their own right, often more desired than real products. They become symbols to communicate our beingness and the technologies that created them help (or lat least we hope will help) to perpetuate our well-being. The dominance of these processes is associated with the emergence of new technologies and communities – computers, the mobile phone, TV channel hopping, telecommunications, the mass media, advertising, and the host of services which define the prevailing consumption society. As individuals we have little control over the kind of research pursued or influence over decisions made in corporate boardrooms over which kinds of products and service should be produced. Nor do we have effective easy of countering or turning away from the barrage of mass media and advertising that are such pervasive forces in shaping our consumption behaviour and response. Collective action is called for. We need good marketing education to ensure consumers create markets as much as markets create consumers.