

## Architectural Ethics, Multiculturalism, and Globalization

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In this essay, I approach architecture, ethics, and globalization from the perspective of postmodern theory, which has both influenced and been influenced by architectural theory. In fact, architects were among the first to utilize the term "postmodernism." By "postmodern theory," I have in mind positions that on the one hand criticize Western ethnocentrism, metaphysical foundationalism, centered subjectivity, and the idea of progress, and on the other hand celebrate the Others who have allegedly been dominated and/or excluded by the practices and attitudes of Western colonialism. Multiculturalism is the best-known ethical and political trend that has been influenced by postmodern theory. My approach to architectural ethics in an age of globalization will be framed by multiculturalism, but will also provide the occasion for some critical reflection about multiculturalism and postmodern theory.

I begin by examining how postmodern theory criticizes modernity and the globalization arising from it. Then, I offer a hypothetical example of the moral dilemmas facing an American architect who attempts to adhere to a postmodern multicultural moral framework, while responsible for designing and helping to oversee the construction of a complex in a southeast Asian city. As we will see, the American architect may bring with her concerns about multiple perspectives and about the oppressed Other that are not shared by her Asian clients. Indeed, they may find such concerns problematic, if not threatening. Finally, having already discussed how postmodern theory helps to contribute to the development of multiculturalism, I will explore how postmodern theory may impede moral activity within the multicultural framework.

### **I. Globalization, modernity, and postmodernity.**

Global economic integration is taking place at the same moment that totalizing political narratives (whether modern ones from developed worlds or traditional ones from developing

worlds) have been giving way to a host of new, often competing, frequently exclusionary narratives that tend to dis-integrate what modern ideologies sought to unite. In the mid-twentieth century, during the height of the Cold War and before anti-colonialism had reached its crescendo, business and political leaders in developing countries often aspired to have their capitals "modernized" by architects who were pleased to erect tall, rectilinear, buildings made of concrete, steel, and glass. Arguably, many of these architects, like other representatives of the capitalist and socialist regimes then competing for global control, believed that they were making a beneficial contribution to these developing societies, the leaders of which often regarded progressive, Western-style economic development as the way beyond poverty, disease, ignorance, political oppression, and general misery. Despite other disagreements, capitalists and socialists alike concurred on the basic premises of Enlightenment modernity: that humankind takes part in a universal history; that basic political and economic rights ought to be extended universally to all humans; that the human estate can be improved by eliminating political oppression, by providing economic well-being and opportunity, by dominating nature through scientifically-guided technology, by encouraging universal education, and by preventing religious dogma and clergy from interfering in political, economic, and scientific affairs.

Postmodern theorists claim that modernity's noble promises have often issued forth in dark consequences, ranging from marginalization and virtual extermination of indigenous cultures to degradation of the biosphere by industrialism, all of which are intensified by globalization. German postmodernists (and anti-modernists) such Nietzsche and Heidegger profoundly influenced recent French theorists, including Derrida and Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, who in turn helped to shape the views of contemporary American postmodern theorists. Let me now briefly mention some of the major views of postmodern theory. I apologize in advance for inevitable superficiality in such a limited account.

**a) Critique of representational epistemology:**

According to postmodern theorists, the production of knowledge is linked to power interests. Far from being the result of reality reflecting itself upon the disinterested mind in a

relatively undistorted manner, as Enlightenment moderns maintained, knowledge is an active, interpretative, and interested affair that is usually controlled by people with more power, money, and status than other people. Those in power shape the research agendas, determine how funding is allocated, and determine what gets to count as "true." Marginalized and oppressed peoples have begun only recently to find the voices needed to contest the power claims asserted by power elites.

**b. Critique of foundational metaphysics and progressivism:**

Modernists such as Marx claimed to discover the deep structures or ultimate foundations that hold the key to understanding universal human history. Many post-modernists, however, deny that there are any such deep structures to be discovered, just as they deny that there is progress and directionality in history. Instead, they depict history as a play of relatively superficial phenomena that lack any particular direction or intrinsic meaning. These claims are damaging for all progressive thinkers, but perhaps particularly for leftist theorists, who purport to unmask ideologies that 1) distort the truth about socio-economic relations and 2) prevent full human self-realization. If there is no "truth" to be distorted, and if there is no "goal" to human history, progressive critique and action become problematic at best.

**c) Critique of the self-grounding, self-present, self-certain, patriarchal, and anthropocentric human subject:**

Summed up in the catchword "anti-humanism," this critique completes the work initiated by Freud, Marx, and other modernists who argued that the vaunted "individual self" or "person" was little more than the effect of linguistic, social, economic, and psychological structures. According to Derridian deconstructionists, the modern subject sustains its illusory self-unity and identity only insofar as it engages in a binary dualism. This unified, normative subject defines itself in opposition to Others (women, poor men, non-whites, etc.) who are "different," and whose very difference invites and justifies oppression, exclusion, and marginalization. Postmodern theory purports to dissolve the patriarchal subject into a host of competing and irreconcilable linguistic signifiers, institutional practices, unquenchable desires, social functions,

family roles, and competing ideologies. According to postmodernists, the modern ideal that individual subjects can interpret the world accurately and act so as to change it for the better stems from a now-discredited foundationalist metaphysics and representationalist epistemology.

The ethical upshot of postmodern theory is that powerful elites and institutions have used their ideologies, knowledge claims, and power to oppress and to exploit individuals and groups who are regarded by such elites and institutions as inferior or insignificant Others. According to this perspective, globalization—despite paying lip service to multicultural notions of inclusion—amounts to colonialism in a more sophisticated and powerful form. Claiming to take seriously postmodern theory's insistence that there is not "one true way" of making sense of things, multiculturalists rightly emphasize that the many alternative viewpoints from which a phenomenon issue may be interpreted. These other perspectives rightly need to be taken into account when decisions are made about a project that will have an impact on people other than those who are responsible for paying for and/or carrying out the project. The fact that there is no one true way of interpreting things demands that a significant level of transparency needs to be in place in the decision making process. Otherwise, the interests of the rich and powerful will inevitably hold sway, usually at the expense of the interest of Others who lack money, status, social position, and ideological authority.

Finally, postmodern theory tends to reject social and cultural hierarchy, and celebrates instead multiculturalism, which often—but wrongly, as we will see—invites the conclusion that no culture's moral perspective is really better than another, but merely different. If one culture's approach to ethical problems is not better, but merely different than another, on what basis can one justify insisting that her moral perspective is superior to someone else's? According to multiculturalism, there is no such basis. Seeking to end hierarchy and domination, multiculturalism calls on people to "celebrate difference," and to acknowledge the virtues of the many cultures of the world.

Despite its apparent antipathy toward hierarchy, however, multiculturalists retain one hierarchical notion: they implicitly affirm that far from being one perspective among others,

multiculturalism is not a perspective at all, but instead a superior and truthful way of conceiving of socio-cultural issues.<sup>1</sup> Multiculturalists have considerable difficulty acknowledging this fact, because they are otherwise so critical of hierarchy. Despite the fact that many multiculturalists strongly criticize modernity and the “dead white males” who promoted it, multiculturalism is far from being antithetical to modern ideals; instead, multiculturalism is a highly evolved position that both includes and goes beyond those ideals. Genuine multiculturalism requires that one both recognize the limits of one's own culture and be open to insight drawn from other cultures, all with one overriding aim: to create a world that works for everyone, a world in which oppression, exclusion, and exploitation are no longer possible. It is no accident that this genuinely multicultural approach is condemned by the world's most oppressive regimes, which complain that this approach compromises the integrity of their long-standing “cultural practices.” Cultures that are only beginning to adopt modern socio-political ideals will often regard multiculturalism with puzzlement and suspicion. Understood appropriately as a higher-order way of understanding cultural difference, multiculturalism is at present adopted by only a minority of Westerners, whereas globalization understood as an economic phenomenon has a much larger reach. A serious clash of cultures can occur when a postmodern multiculturalist attempts to deal with businesspeople in a society whose commitment to modernity is largely limited to globalization defined as planetary economic expansion and integration.

## **2. Multiculturalism Meets Asian Clients: An Example**

Suppose that you are an American architect with multiculturalist leanings, and that you have agreed to head up a team that will design and oversee construction of a major commercial, telecommunication, and residential complex in a Southeast Asian capital. By working for a large architectural firm in the year 2004, rather than in the year 1954, you recognize that—unless due caution is exercised—there are likely to be problematic cultural, social, political, and environmental consequences for this project, which obviously embodies and furthers the process of economic globalization. Painfully aware of the design disasters carried out by architects who ignored the interests of people affected by large-scale projects (here, one may think of New York

City's Robert Moses and the cult of urban renewal in decades immediately following the end of World War II), and after reading postmodern theory, you bring a multiculturalist perspective to your Southeast Asian project. You resolve to take into account the interests of various parties, not only the interests of those who are funding the project, but also the interests of those who will be affected by it, especially those adversely affected. You also believe that those who may be adversely affected include not only human Others, but non-human Others as well, including plants, animals, and their natural habitats.

When you bring up such issues with your Asian clients, however, they resist the idea of consulting anyone else about the project for which they are paying and which is supposed to serve their interests. You push the issue politely, pointing out that a project of this scope is bound to have a negative impact on at least some people and on some aspects of the natural environment. After further prodding, your clients arrange for you to speak with representatives from a "local community group" that favors the project. This group, as your own research discovers, turns out to represent a number of local businessmen who propose to open job-promoting boutiques and other shops in the complex. Not represented by this so-called community group, however, are numerous small shop owners and residents who will be either put out of business or displaced by the project.

It turns out that these negatively affected people are mostly Chinese, a disliked minority in the city in which the project is being carried out. A brother-in-law of one of the major promoters of the project happens to control local television news and owns one of the major newspapers. Far from doing his best to air different perspectives on the project, he sees to it that news coverage amounts to boosterism that either discounts or ignores the protests being waged against it. State and local government agencies, which are apparently heavily influenced by your wealthy clients, take what you regard as unjustifiable measures to quell these protests. You also discover that the project, which is to be built along a riverfront, could seriously degrade public drinking water and damage the local fishing industry, unless more funding is made available to improve the sewage treatment required for a project of this scope. Your clients

exhibit little interest in such environmental problems, preferring instead to emphasize how much new money that the project will bring to the local and state economy, not to mention their own pockets. Finally, upon meeting with construction suppliers and labor leaders, you discover that your firm will need to provide some extra cash (not on the books) to help insure that the project is completed in a timely fashion. How do you, the well-intended multiculturalist architect, identify and address the moral problems described above?

First of all, you remain concerned about those whose interests are actively being ignored in the planning and decision making process. There is nothing particularly postmodern or multicultural about this conclusion, however. Instead, virtually all modern moral and political theories hold that in principle equal moral consideration must be granted to all persons who may be harmed by a proposed action. Postmodern theory and multiculturalism have frequently asserted that modernity's commitment to universality has in fact frequently been compromised, e.g., by defining "personhood" in an exclusionary manner that leaves out women, blacks, and so on. Postmodern theorists and multiculturalists sometimes claim that modernity is too flawed to fix, but the beneficial practical outcome of such criticism has been for liberal political institutions to redouble their efforts to live up to the ideal that all persons ought to be equal before the law and ought to have their interests taken into account equally in all processes that significantly affect.

According to the modernist, the behavior of your Asian clients is so problematic because far from being multicultural or postmodern, it is in some respects not even modern. Instead, your clients are committed to premodern social practices and cultural values. As a multiculturalist, you might reply that describing the Asian clients as premodern presupposes that their cultural practices are somehow inferior to Western ones, and that perhaps this is only because they are interpreted within a Western developmental model (premodern, modern, postmodern). Despite such considerations, you gradually recognize the following: The mere fact that someone possesses big capital, has sophisticated marketing practices, and is utilizing the latest building design and construction techniques in no way guarantees that he or she

simultaneously adheres to political and ethical norms that you, the postmodern multiculturalist, take for granted on the part of the supposedly benighted modern liberals whom you have been urging back home to adopt your multicultural approach.

Your concern about the Chinese falls on deaf ears, because your clients' prejudice toward them is implacable, even if subtly expressed, and impossible to change during the time that you will be associated with the project. "You are not in New York now," observes one of your clients. Your complaints about bribery are brushed aside with the remark that this is just how business is done here. Moreover, your clients are not at all concerned about calling on a brother-in-law to have the media portray events in the way most favorable to the project, because everyone in that country uses family connections to get things done. Criticizing nepotism and promoting "transparency" in financial dealings is regarded as a strange idea imposed by foreigners. Your clients find your environmental concerns equally puzzling. What business is it of ours, they ask, what happens to the fish in the river? "We don't make a living as fishermen!" Finally, you discover that it would be pointless for the Chinese to bring a lawsuit against your clients, not only because there are limited grounds for such a suit in that country, but also because the legal system is notoriously corrupt.

You begin to draw several conclusions here. First, far from being willing to give all affected parties a voice, your clients—however soft-spoken they may be—will use every means at their disposal to achieve their goals, even if doing so causes many innocent people to suffer. Second, for your clients to take seriously your multiculturalism, they must first adopt the position of the modern liberal universalism, but they have not done so. You and your clients are clearly not on the same playing field. Third, you begin to abandon a facile moral relativism, because you have come to realize that in important respects both liberalism and multiculturalism are morally superior to some of the attitudes and practices of your clients. They disregard for the interests of everyone but a privileged few and members of their own ethnic group. This is completely inconsistent with the worthy multicultural vision of generating a world that works for everyone, by taking into account the perspectives of everyone—including plants and animals in

some cases—affected by a proposed course of action. You begin to see that authentic multiculturalism involves not merely the critique and even the renunciation of modernity, but instead the fulfillment of some of its major aspirations. Fourth, you realize that if you continue with the project, you are going to become morally culpable for suffering that could have been avoided had your clients lived in a modern society.

### **3. How Postmodern Theory Poses Problems for Multiculturalism**

Despite offering important criticisms of certain aspects of modernity, postmodern theory puts obstacles in the path of realizing the multicultural vision inspired by postmodern theory. One such obstacle is the deconstruction of the individual subject and moral agent, now depicted as a temporary placeholder in socio-economic roles, and as the mere “effect” of linguistic activity. If Foucault is right that power and desire animate all participants at the micro-level, rather than being located in some overarching structure at the macro-level, such as corporations, capitalism, or state socialism, then it is naïve and dangerous to hope for human liberation after destroying the “system.” Indeed, in view of the claim that knowledge is a function of power-interests, suspicion should be directed at those claiming to know how to bring freedom, liberation, and social improvement. Today's revolutionary theoreticians and activists will become tomorrow's oppressors. The hermeneutics of suspicion at work in postmodern theory turns on multiculturalism itself? Who speaks for multiculturalism? And what are their hidden power agendas?

Regarding your effort to include voices from the Chinese community that will be negatively affected by the proposed project in the Southeast Asian capital, some postmodern theorists would ask how that “community” to be defined? In a large city, there will be many different communities, each of which would be affected in different ways by a major building project. The very concept of “community” is itself suspect, insofar as a community often forms its identity in a way analogous to the formation of the identity of the subject: namely, by opposing itself to those whom it excludes. One community, for example, may portray itself as speaking for the “ordinary citizens” of the southeast Asian capital, whereas in fact it may

represent particular interests that ignore the concerns of many other people. Ultimately, the acid bath of postmodern theory dissolves community into its individual constituents, but these in turn—as we have seen—are merely the de-centered effects of social, economic, cultural, and linguistic forces too complex to be understood. The possibility for cohesive social action evaporates.

Some feminists note sardonically that just as women discover their own personal voice and authority, masculine postmodern theorists decide that personal authority and acting subjects are illusions of linguistic structures, epistemic regimes, or socio-economic forces. While acknowledging postmodern theory's insight that important differences obtain among women from many different classes, races, nationalities, and religious affiliation, "standpoint" feminists nevertheless insist that many different kinds of women can and should unite on an ad hoc basis to address issues that negatively affects all of them. Such common concerns could certainly form a basis for uniting many individuals of Chinese descent and many other individuals who may be affected negatively by the project in the Southeast Asian capital.

Perhaps the most important problem that postmodern theory poses for the multiculturalist, however, is suspicion about hierarchy and thus about the possibility of socio-cultural progress. Postmodern theory usually represents progress as a Eurocentric "grand narrative" that purports to be universally valid, but functions to legitimate Western domination of groups who are supposedly less developed. Sharing such suspicion, the multiculturalist hesitates to acknowledge her tacit belief that multiculturalism is better ethnocentrism, nationalism, racism, sexism, and so on. The fact that multiculturalism has emerged primarily in modern Western societies, however, leads her to realize that modernity is not only a precondition for multiculturalism, but also that both modernity and multiculturalism must somehow reflect socio-cultural progress. Critics of globalization often point out that to anticipate and thus to mitigate its negative consequences, as well as to facilitate its potentially positive outcomes, grand narratives are needed. The great entrepreneurs involved in globalization surely have grand narratives of their own!

Multiculturalism not criticizes existing socio-cultural arrangements, but also maintains that worldwide adoption of multiculturalism would make possible a better future, e.g., one involving less domination, exploitation, injustice, and so on. In this respect, multiculturalism—despite itself—intimates a progressive vision of history. Yet, multiculturalism must advance an argument to demonstrate why it is preferable to its alternatives, why it is in an important and legitimate sense “progressive.” David S. Owen, commenting on Jürgen Habermas’s work, writes:

Although critical social theory accepts the premise of the historicity of both the subject and object of social inquiry, an adequate critical social theory ... would need to be capable of distinguishing between progressive and regressive social change. If critical social theory did not possess this capacity, then it would not be able to distinguish better from worse social orderings, as determined by some impartial means. Critical social theory would be forced to become decisionistic [arbitrary], in the sense that once alternative historical paths were described, we could only choose between them. That is, there would be no principle of choice to which we could appeal.... For a critical social theory to achieves its ends, it must incorporate an account of progressive social change <sup>2</sup>

As Owen points out, multicultural fears about Western triumphalism can be assuaged by a) acknowledging that both social reality and our attempts to evaluate such reality are historically conditioned, and b) by rejecting modernist claims that progress is linear, inevitable, and universal. A historically situated concept of progress must be linked to a theory of the learning process involved in individual and cultural development. Although there is not time here to describe such development, substantial empirical evidence supports that it does take place, cross-culturally. The developmental learning process leads away from egocentrism toward an ever wider and more inclusive perspective, e.g., away from ethnocentrism toward multiculturalism.

If you are the architect responsible for the project in the Southeast Asian city, the task remains very difficult: how to nudge your clients toward greater openness and flexibility, toward greater inclusiveness and wider embrace, without losing their confidence and your job? Your moral situation is complicated by the fact that people in your own firm, and in the Asian city as well, are supporting their families by jobs involved in the project. Exhibiting moral self-righteousness may allow you to feel better, but would have serious consequences for which you would have to take some moral responsibility. In the end, muddling through may be the best that you can do. Having (presumably) learned a great deal in the process, the next time someone approaches you about such a project, you will have a better idea of the kinds of issues that will have to be addressed, preferably before any contracts are signed.

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent analysis of the promises and perils of multiculturalism, see Ken Wilber, A Brief History of Everything (Boston: Shambhala, 1996), and other of his even more recent works.

<sup>2</sup> David S. Owen, Between Reason and History: Habermas and the Idea of Progress (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 23. This is a very helpful book.