BOOK REVIEW PERSPECTIVES

Stuart Sim, *The End of Modernity: What the Financial and Environmental Crisis is Really Telling Us*

Edinburgh University Press, 2010, 216pp, ISBN: 9780748640355

Editor’s Introduction

The financial collapse of 2007–08 and the subsequent Great Recession triggered latent recognition that Wall Street chicanery and climate destabilization share a number of common features. The failure to adequately regulate both financial markets and emission streams springs from a perilous combination of political malfeasance, corporate greed, and public quiescence. Our dual economic and environmental problems are also emblematic of a global economy that is intent—indeed programmed—to use any and all available means to propagate an endless supply of consumer goods to maintain an illusion of “growth.”

We have also come to understand in palpable ways the tragic consequences that ensue when enthusiasm for this treadmill wanes and consumers are no longer able to keep running with sufficient vigor. We have created over the past sixty years a growth-bound economy that is dependent on three preconditions to maintain itself—proportional investment in public goods, rising wages across a broad cross section of income classes, and continual novelty.

John Kenneth Galbraith’s prescient observation in 1958 that the United States was characterized to a growing extent by “private affluence and public squalor” was an early warning of where things were heading with respect to the first precondition. With regard to the second prerequisite, several economically advanced countries—the consumptive sponges of the contemporary global economy—have seen more than three decades of stagnating average wages while the bulk of the proceeds of growth have been appropriated by the wealthiest consumers. Finally, with the exception of information technologies, most innovation has focused on relatively ephemeral design modifications, production-cost reductions, creative financial instruments, and new ways to impart premature product obsolescence.

To reinvigorate the shattered machinery of the growth economy, we are now confronted with a number of alluring concepts centered on notions of “green growth” and the “green economy.” Like a two-pack-a-day smoker captured by the promises of low-nicotine cigarettes, “safe tobacco,” and other such marketing inducements, many policy makers today are besotted by the prospect of seductive, but ultimately chimerical, solutions that avoid the challenges of confronting head-on the tangled contractions in our severely impaired growth machine.

Rumblings through have begun to emerge on the periphery of scholarship and policy practice. Numerous efforts are afoot to bring to public attention the propensity of current activities to promote “uneconomic growth,” the rebound effects that are induced by more efficient technologies, the overall weak relationship between economic growth and well-being, and the opportunities that abound to facilitate flourishing lives. We are also witnessing a renewal of interest in the field of political economy and an exciting uptake of its insights by sustainability scientists. My own bookshelf holds a number of relevant studies and it bears calling attention to them by name (in chronological sequence): James Gustave Speth’s *The Bridge at the Edge of the World* (Yale University Press, 2008), Tim Jackson’s *Prosperity Without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (Earthscan, 2009), David Boyle and Andrew Sims’ *The New Economics: A Bigger Picture* (Earthscan, 2009), David Korten’s, *Agenda for a New Economy: From Phantom Wealth to Real Wealth* (Berrett-Koehler, 2010), Joseph Stiglitz’s, *Freefall: America, Free Markets, and the Sinking of the World Economy* (Noton, 2010), Juliet Schor’s *Plenitude: The New Economics of True Wealth* (Penguin Press, 2010), Diane Coyle’s, *The Economics of Enough* (Princeton University Press, 2011), Karin Ekström and Kay Glans’, *Beyond the Consumption Bubble* (Routledge 2011), and Chandran Nair’s, *Consumptionomics: Asia’s Role in Reshaping Capitalism and Saving the Planet* (Wiley, 2011). This list is by no means complete, but is indicative of a powerful wave.

It would have been wonderful to convene symposia on each of these volumes, but alas time and space have worked against this ambition. Instead, the current issue of SSPP provides a tripartite discussion of Stuart Sim’s new book, *The End of Modernity: What the Financial and Environmental Crisis is Really Telling Us* (Edinburgh University Press, 2010).
Perhaps in the future there will be opportunities to take up some of the other studies in a similar format. For now, let me thank Ian Gough, Kyla Tienhaara, and John Piene for their thorough reviews and acknowledge as well Stuart Sim’s thoughtful response to these commentaries.

Maurie Cohen, Editor

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Stuart Sim, in *The End of Modernity*, contends that the twin crises in the title are propelling us beyond modernity and postmodernity. What does this mean? And does it help us understand and deal with the aftermath of the twin crises? Let me say to begin that I agree that these crises do indeed exist and pose an egregious threat to our well-being and that of the planet.

"Modernity" Sim identifies with the quest for continual progress in mastering nature and in expanding economic output without limit. This outlook is associated with a universalist history expounding progress, a worldview associated with the Enlightenment. It is thus plausible that modernity lies at the root of the threat to planetary sustainability evinced by global warming and other macro-level environmental threats, and possibly of the implosion of financial capitalism in 2008.

However, Sim also contends that modernity has involved a strong commitment to deregulated free markets and democracy. This point reminds us of the neoliberal turn around 1980 and the subsequent Washington Consensus. It drastically collapses the time span of modernity from three centuries to three decades. It is not possible to define modernity both ways. Indeed, as the author recognizes later on, even in the heyday of neoliberal capitalism other forms of capitalism thrived (e.g., Germany) and emerged (e.g., China), and the dominant issue today may well be the "contested modernity" shaped by China’s challenge to the United States.

What about postmodernity? This is characterized as an intellectual challenge to modernity with roots in architecture and aesthetics, but which began to develop as a more integrated critique during the late 1960s at the end of the long post-war boom. Postmodernity challenged Marxism and other grand narratives of progress. In its place it advocated skepticism and limits to the power of reason, antiauthoritarianism and pluralism to enable the pursuit of personal liberation, small government, and respect for the past. Sim develops the idea of the "economic sublime" to encapsulate this—a situation where we genuinely do not know what will happen next, or what the effects of our actions will be.

But he goes on to assert that postmodernism underpins "an economics of enough," a recognition that it is not always necessary or desirable to have more of everything in material terms. Of this I am unconvinced. Does not much postmodern writing extol the virtue of the abundance and variety that modern capitalism makes available to consumers in the rich world?

In any case, Sim argues that we now need to move beyond postmodernity to what he calls real postmodernity. In part, he says, this is a move from an intellectual critique to "an actual state of affairs requiring a concerted sociopolitical response." Now that modernity itself is collapsing under the weight of its internal contradictions, we have transcended the rhetoric of postmodernism. The challenges we face are immediate and material as well as moral. So, he claims, we need strong, interventionist states (even elements of a command economy) to deal with climate change and economic breakdown—no more small government! Conspicuous consumption must be replaced with the economics of enough, a new collectivism counterposed to the hyperindividualism of the past three decades, and a renewed belief in public service.

This new sociopolitical response is not so different from one variant of modernity—modern social democracy. But what does it have to do with postmodernity? Is it not as accurate to see postmodernism as an intellectual current feeding into the neoliberalism of the 1980s? In other words, is it not the case that postmodernism has contributed to the last phase of modernism which ended in such a spectacular crisis in 2008? Much postmodernism writing rejected interventionist states, admired the catallaxy of markets and individual initiative, and rejected big narratives that could be used to challenge producer and consumer interests. It was at least compatible with the age of me-now. Sim’s recognition of this connection does not so much rebuild the whole postmodern project as challenge it.

I would also question the displacing of "capitalism" by modernity in the book. The system which dominates the world today, one in which firms must perform pursue profit or face extinction, is still capitalist. The dull pressure of economic competition forces all managers of capital to expand its value *ad infinitum*, which drives economic growth and carbon emissions. True, states and public institutions can modify the operation of national capitalisms at a macro-level: forms of state intervention interact with...
other historical institutions and tend to be strongly path dependent. But financial capital still wields a structural power over states, via control over investment, ability to exit from national jurisdictions, pressure over the terms of public sector borrowing, and in other ways.

An alternative political economy explanation of the financial crisis would begin with the collapse of profits in the late 1960s and 1970s which engendered the political success of the neoconservative countermovement around 1980. Since then the share of wages in gross domestic product (GDP) has fallen ten percentage points in the countries comprising the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and inequality has mushroomed. This collapse of the wage share threatened growth in domestic consumption demand and fueled the catastrophic rise in personal debt across much of the West, which eventually precipitated the financial crisis of 2008. Political economy provides an understanding of capitalism as a system of path-dependent development interrupted by infrequent crises and switching points, which recast the role of states in managing the system.

The secular and unprecedented growth in world output is now engendering the distinct and longer-term crisis posed by climate change. Here, there is at first sight common ground with Sim’s critique of modernity as unsustainable. Yet, I would still claim that the ideology, the narrative of belief in unending growth and progress, is a reflection of the real processes rooted in the competitive pressure to enhance profits within a now-global capitalist economy. Moreover, the postmodern “solutions”—skepticism about our collective ability to understand and control these events, the pursuit of personal liberation—are woefully inadequate, as Sim demonstrates.

The “real postmodern” appears to have contradictory aims: to undermine the neoliberal version of postmodernity, while including modernist principles of governance within the term. This ambivalence suggests that the modernism-postmodernism framework is not a helpful way to understand the wrenching changes now taking place in the world economy and ecology. In my view, a political economy analysis of capitalism offers a better understanding of the twin financial and environmental crises than a resurrected postmodernism.

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I found Stuart Sim’s The End of Modernity to be an accessible and enjoyable read even though I have very little prior knowledge of postmodernism. I also applaud the author—a professor of critical theory and English literature—for his willingness to venture into debates about economics. He brings a fresh perspective to many of the issues that he discusses and manages to weave in interesting references to art, architecture, music, and theatre.

The basic premise of The End of Modernity is that “modernity has reached its limit as a cultural form” because it is “destructive of both the planet and...socio-economic systems.” For Sim, the evidence of modernity’s demise is found in the 2008 global financial crisis and the ongoing climate crisis. However, Sim is not arguing for an “intellectual” postmodern response to these crises. In his view, postmodernists have been successful in illuminating and critiquing the underlying power structure of modernity, but have failed to critically examine its overall objectives (e.g., economic growth). Instead, Sim believes that what we need is “real postmodernity”—a concerted sociopolitical response to the environmental and financial crises. This is what he proposes to outline in this volume.

The first part of the book examines the cultural dimensions of the end of modernity. In the introductory chapter, Sim argues “that there is currently an ideological vacuum where modernity once held sway,” which “presents an opportunity to construct a better kind of lifestyle.” He criticizes the “cult of progress” that has defined modernity and calls for the cultivation of a politics and an economics of “enough” and a return to a simpler way of life. Interestingly, Sim suggests that it is no longer “at all radical to question conspicuous consumption and its impact, not just on our individual psychology but on the environment.” I more hope, rather than believe, this to be the case. It is certainly true that, of late, critiques of society’s obsession with consumption and economic growth have become more popular within certain fields of academia. Some excellent books in this vein have been published in the last few years (e.g., Dauvergne, 2008; Victor, 2008; Jackson, 2009). However, I would argue that such thinking has not yet been welcomed in mainstream public discourse. For example, in the current debate in Australia over a
carbon tax, both sides remain firmly couched in either fear or reassurance about the impact on the continuing ability of consumers to consume and the economy to grow (Thompson, 2011). It would be political suicide for an elected official in this country to suggest that a carbon tax should curb consumption or that Australia’s gross domestic product (GDP) does not need to grow any further.

Sim’s next chapter discusses what modernity, as a cultural paradigm, promised and assesses how well it has delivered. The author acknowledges that in “material terms it would have to be agreed that modernity has largely delivered the goods,” at least in the West. He also points out that individuals in many countries are better off in political terms, with greater rights and freedoms and a greater say in how society is governed, than they were in premodern times. However, he highlights that, in practice, democracy has not always reflected the ideals that underpin it and, furthermore, that much of the world remains in the grip of authoritarianism. Additionally, he notes that many material gains in developed countries have been made possible only through continuing oppression in the developing world. Although Sim briefly turns to these elements that comprise the “dark side” of modernity in the closing pages of Chapter 2, I was surprised that he did not dwell in this section on the psychological implications of our addiction to consumption, which experts have argued has made us prone to depression and anxiety (James, 2008).

The second part of the book examines the economic dimensions of the end of modernity. The chapters in this section summarize the Marxist critique of capitalism and take particular aim at Milton Friedman and the neoliberal economic theory that he espoused. The section covering the financial crisis is largely a series of summaries/reviews of several books that have been written by economists, economic journalists, and industry insiders. Sim agrees with some of the conclusions drawn by these authors, but questions others. For example, while Sim clearly has a great deal of respect for Paul Krugman, he argues that Krugman’s assessment of the credit crisis is too optimistic and too narrow and thus “hides the bigger picture” of an ideology of constant material progress that is fundamentally unsustainable. Although very little in this part of the book is new, the summaries are well done and provide a good entry point to the literature for those who have not read widely on the topic.

The final part of the book aims to look “beyond modernity” to see what life and politics would look like in a “post-progress world.” Sim begins in Chapter 7 by assessing what we can learn from the arts. Although I found this chapter interesting, I did get a little lost, perhaps because concepts such as “double-coding” are alien to me. However, I do agree with Sim’s suggestion that “it would be socially beneficial if much of the energy being channelled into creating more economic value were instead directed into artistic activities.”

In Chapter 8, Sim turns to the question of how politics should be structured after the demise of modernity. Essentially, he appears to be arguing for “big government,” for more regulation and more intervention in the market to deal with the financial and environmental crises. However, he does recognize the pitfalls of big government and the need to guard against authoritarianism. Some of Sim’s comments in this chapter—for example those he makes about the benefits of the Euro and the need to consider China’s recommendation for a world currency—appear to be largely focused on ensuring financial stability. Others, such as his discussion of the need to replace GDP as our principle measure of national well-being, address the problem of our overriding preoccupation with economic growth.

In the concluding chapter, Sim reiterates his call for a “strong central authority” and more regulation. He also makes a plea for socialism to be reconsidered as a source of cultural ideals. In the closing paragraphs, the author notes that the post-progress world that he has outlined “will not be to everyone’s taste” and that “an economics and politics of enough will no doubt invoke some resistance, especially from the business community and the commercial world.” In my view, this is a gross understatement. One can, for example, contrast this appraisal with Tim Jackson’s (2009) assessment that reorienting the economy and shifting the social logic of consumerism “may well be the biggest challenge ever faced by human society.”

Overall, I do not believe that Sim presents, in this final part of the book, a strong and coherent vision of a post-progress world. I was left with a very clear picture of what he believes is wrong with modernity, but less appreciation of how exactly we can move beyond it. The calls for greater regulatory intervention in the market could have been much more specific. For example, advertising, especially when targeted to children, plays a critical role in promoting and sustaining conspicuous consumption. More regulation in this area could, therefore, make an important contribution to efforts to bring about a “culture of enough.” Furthermore, while Sim suggests that we need government “to protect us against an ever-inventive corporate sector eager to bring back modernity,” he does not explore how the corporate sector itself could be radically restructured to be brought into line with the ideals of a post-progress world.

My other main critique of the book is that its subtitle suggests that Sim will explore both the finan-
cial and environmental crises, but the discussion of the former far outweighs that of the latter. It feels as though Sim assumes that his readers appreciate all the connections between growth, consumption, and environmental degradation. However, most politicians and even the leaders of some environmental nongovernmental organizations (ENGOs) continue to advance the view that sustainability does not require a re-evaluation of the Western lifestyle or an abandonment of growth. Many observers who accept the world’s dire situation continue to believe that greater investment in technological solutions to environmental problems will be sufficient to avert disaster. This is why other authors have endeavored to dismantle the myth of absolute decoupling—the notion that environmental impacts and resource use can decline in overall terms despite rising GDP (see, e.g., Jackson, 2009).

Finally, I was also surprised that there was so little mention in the book of the “green” responses to the financial crisis—the calls for a “green new deal,” the “green” elements of fiscal stimulus packages and so forth (see, e.g., Green New Deal Group, 2008, Barbier, 2010). I would have been interested in Sim’s views on whether such proposals and actions—often referred to as “green Keynesianism”—represented a turning point toward a “real” postmodernity or were instead an “opportunity for the rejuvenation of global capitalism” (Mueller, 2009).

Sim has been very ambitious and at the same time economical (The End of Modernity is only 216 pages). As such, I suppose it is hardly surprising that he has not touched on every issue that I regard as important, especially considering how different our disciplinary backgrounds are. On this note, I should also stress that I am not capable of evaluating the contribution that this book makes to the literature on postmodernism. What I can say is that while Sim certainly does not have all the answers to the monumental challenges currently facing human society, his book is a welcome addition to a growing body of literature that is exploring potential paths to a more egalitarian and environmentally sustainable future.

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The End of Modernity, Stuart Sim’s holistic perspective on the evolution of capitalism and financial investment policy and related politics, is complex and insightful, particularly in the context of our current tumultuous global economy, high unemployment, and massive loss of investment capital. The introduction highlights how the 1972 demolition of a high-rise public housing complex in St. Louis, Missouri, which had become a harbinger for drugs and crime, symbolized the end of modernity in the context of architecture. Sim proposes that modernity was closely tied to what he refers to as “the cult of progress” via the pursuit of unbridled capitalism. He describes an economic tipping point with the demise of the Wall Street investment bank Lehmann Brothers, “who had prospered on the basis of a huge credit bubble” until 2008, as a symbol of the singular focus on capitalism. Much of the book focuses on Western society’s central push for ever-expanding consumerism. His implication is that the demise of modernity has been on a long slippery slope toward disfavor. His reference to Lehman Brothers left me confused as to if and when the end of modernity has actually occurred.

Reflection on modernity’s promise and reality was the most compelling overarching message to me. For the Western lifestyle, modernity has improved health and well-being in terms of an expanding economy and jobs. Sim points out that “[t]he last few decades have been something of a golden age, where
disposable income has increased remarkably.” The book’s description of the evolution of the economic dimensions effectively illustrates the transformation of a system that distributed benefits and control from the many to the contemporary system that serves the interests of the few. The globalization of the economy via multinational corporations and the financial sector has been the stage for the concentration of wealth and political influence. The credit crisis is best reflected in Sim’s description of how hedge funds evolved to become a huge crap game of risk that benefited only a few who bet against them. Sim, though, missed an opportunity to drill down in more detail on how no one was in charge or understood the true risks as related to, say, the mortgage market. More importantly, almost no individual paid a price for their malfeasance through payment of a fine and/or jail time. A teachable moment was lost on how modernity tends to get a free pass and the challenge of defining and describing accountability and consequence is still wanting. There is no discussion of how to compensate legitimate victims who were taken for a ride.

Another tenet of the philosophy underpinning modernity is to gain greater control over the environment. The threat to our planet’s environmental sustainability from the consequences of these policies and actions is woven throughout the book, with frequent reference to the implications of global warming from ever-increasing carbon-dioxide emissions into the atmosphere. Updating their assessment of the dangers of climate change, the International Panel on Climate Change tracks their concerns, including “increases in extreme events with substantial consequences for societies and natural systems. Examples include increase in the frequency, intensity, or consequences of heat waves, floods, droughts, wildfires, or tropical cyclones” (Smith et al. 2009). The extraordinary North American extreme weather incidents experienced so far in this La Niña year of 2011 have resulted in a high cost of lives and property from extreme drought in the west, to flooding along the Mississippi River basin, and numerous tornados in the Midwest and south.

The most significant shortcoming of the book, for me, is an inadequate number of case examples reflecting Sim’s major points. For example, when it comes to the concentration of wealth currently in the United States, 1% of the population takes in nearly 25% of the income and controls over 40% of the wealth (Stiglitz, 2011). Another dramatic example of the concentration of power is that in 2010, the U. S. Supreme Court ruled that corporations can contribute unlimited funds to political campaigns. President Obama swiftly blasted the court’s decision, stating that “The Supreme Court has given a green light to a new stampede of special interest money in our politics. It is a major victory for big oil, Wall Street banks, health insurance companies and the other powerful interests that marshal their power every day in Washington to drown out the voices of everyday Americans” (Tedford, 2010).

Sim’s book largely leaves open the question of who will drive the espoused dramatic change toward a more equitable view. In the United States, prime twentieth century examples of change include the right to vote for women, emergence from the Great Depression (due largely to involvement in World War II and the subsequent legislation that provided decommissioned soldiers with free access to higher education and generous housing subsidies), and the Civil Rights and Vietnam War protests. In the emerging twenty-first century, youth have been primary global voices in calling for environmental sustainability, including reducing greenhouse-gas emissions, and in the exciting so-called Arab Spring demanding democratic governance in authoritarian countries across the Middle East and North Africa. At the center of implementing successful change is the unfettered sharing of ideas and innovation, particularly by the youth. Information technology has emerged as the connective tissue via Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and blogs. Today’s young-uns, as we say in East Tennessee, give me hope for this fundamental shift toward social responsibility in the future that we so desperately need!

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Rejoinder from the author
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My first response to the three reviews of The End of Modernity is to thank the reviewers for their thoughtful and fair analyses of the book’s arguments. I am taken to task by all of them for not having an absolutely clear-cut answer to the problems facing us, but the book was intended above all to generate debate, so I am pleased it has done so.

That I have been very influenced by postmodern thought is critical to why I have not offered comprehensive solutions to the crisis we are mired in. It would be only too easy to come up with such solutions if I were either a Marxist or a neoliberal: recommending a command economy on the one hand, or an even more unregulated market economy on the other, which relied on the “invisible hand” to correct any of the system’s excesses and abuses. In both cases there is a clear plan of action based on a set of ideological principles that adherents totally believe in and will accept no counterargument to. Whether you agree or disagree, you know precisely what the position is: you are being offered a program claiming to have all the answers needed. I really do believe we are currently stuck in an “ideological vacuum,” however, and the book can be considered a report from there. If there is one thing that postmodernism has persuasively communicated it is that no one theory, or grand narrative, will answer all our problems. The central dilemma facing any postmodernist wishing to criticize the current political set up, therefore, is that he or she has no universal theory to fall back on. Unfortunately, most people are still looking for the elusive “grand narrative” that will offer us a route out of the current mess.

In retrospect, the book might better have been entitled The End of Modernity? because it is querying the sustainability of the growth economy we associate with modernity as a cultural system. I am aware that modernity can mean many things and not just “capitalism,” and I was certainly not arguing against the benefits brought by the social and political changes of the post-Enlightenment era. While I agree with Ian Gough that capitalism has not gone away and is still the prevailing ideology in the business world, what I was emphasizing was that it has lost its credibility. Perhaps the book might even better have been titled The End of the Credibility of Modernity? (although no doubt the publisher would have found this too unwieldy!). I would claim, as well, that it is pretty difficult to imagine modernity without capitalism, which becomes the means by which modernity can achieve its goal of endlessly improving the material quality of life. If that is not all that modernity is about, it is manifestly what has come to dominate it. Perhaps other forms are available, but capitalist modernity is the one we are stuck with at present, and all that the Washington Consensus has done is to reduce what few controls were being applied to it. At the very least, capitalism is a logical extension of modernity.

Losing credibility does not mean that capitalist modernity will wither away in the fashion that Marx had predicted; otherwise, the Great Depression would have been the end of it. Those with a stake in the system will do their utmost to keep resuscitating it, and they have found allies in the political class who have provided public money to keep the system going in the aftermath of the credit crisis. This does bring out a problem for anyone writing on current affairs. I was writing the book in 2009 when the viability of neoliberal economics was being called into question on a variety of fronts, but throughout the Western nations the population is being urged by governments to believe we can return to “business as usual” if we agree to cut down on public spending. In most cases this argument has been accepted (if often somewhat grudgingly), which suggests that collectively we are in denial over the real situation (which might also be said of global warming). I find this to be quite depressing and was hoping it would not happen. If John Peine is “confused” about when, and whether, modernity actually did end, I can only say that its loss of credibility does not seem to have deterred its true believers from carrying on with their crusade. And their efforts have proved more successful than one might have guessed back in 2009: Lehman Brothers seemed a very symbolic event at the time, but somehow we have managed to “forget” it collectively.

I am currently writing a follow-up to The End of Modernity entitled Addicted to Profit? Reclaiming Our Lives from the Free Market (due out in 2012
from Edinburgh University Press). This book will look at the factors, psychological as well as political, that have disposed us toward forgetfulness over the traumatic events of the credit crisis, so perhaps it will answer Kyla Tienhaara’s point about my lack of detail regarding “the psychological implications of our addiction to consumption” (note that I have been careful to include a question mark in the title this time around). I might also say, in response to the point Tienhaara raises about undercoverage of the environmental crisis, that I had in fact gone into detail on just that topic in a previous book, The Carbon Footprint Wars: What Might Happen If We Retreat from Globalization (Edinburgh University Press, 2009). I am now thinking of The End of Modernity, The Carbon Footprint Wars, and Addicted to Profit? as forming a trilogy about the current socioeconomic paradigm and its underlying ideological principles; so there is a larger-scale critique taking place.

It comes across in all the reviews that modernity and postmodernity can mean a diversity of things and I concede that a form of shorthand must occur when writing a book on those topics. Yes, as Ian Gough claims, some postmodernists do support the “abundance and variety” that the free market economy brings— but not all do. One of the most striking aspects of postmodern thought is that dispensing with grand narratives can induce feelings of pessimism in some theorists, a recognition that neither the far right nor the far left have all the answers to humanity’s problems and that we are condemned instead to an endless series of negotiations about how to deal with the local problems at hand. I think that ditching grand narratives is liberating, and clearly it is for some postmodernist thinkers (Charles Jencks, for example), but there is no set position adopted by all postmodernists. Postmodernism is not an ideology, it is a critique of ideology, and a critique that is being conducted in a variety of sometimes conflicting ways. I regard postmodernism as an extreme form of skepticism, and as with skepticism in general it can be an uncomfortable position; but I also regard it as being more honest than believing that we can find yet another theory that will explain everything and tell us precisely what to do. I take real postmodernity to be that skeptical cast of mind, rather than simply jumping onto the neoliberal bandwagon because it freed us from political controls. It also freed us from responsibility toward others, and that is more problematic. I do not agree that postmodernism has to lead to such a condition (it does not in the work of Jean-François Lyotard, for example), and my intention was not so much to resurrect postmodernism as to point out that there are some aspects of its critique of modernity that we might learn from if we are going to question the ideology behind the cult of progress.

Neither is modernity a homogenous set of beliefs, and yes, it can include social democracy as well as neoliberalism. The book works on the assumption, however, that the latter has eclipsed the former in the last few decades and that it would be a positive step to reintroduce some social democratic practices into the current situation in order to protect us from the excesses of the free market. Even if all that does is to temper the impact of neoliberal economics on the current world order, that would be a move in the right direction. What I am campaigning for, ultimately, is a change in consciousness about how we view the world, and that is an ambitious project. However, I just cannot believe that the free market represents the summit of human achievement and that we cannot change our mind over that.

I recognize that there is a problem in arguing for stronger government to defend us from neoliberalism, as this is very much against the grain of the current political climate in the West, where government is all too often viewed with outright suspicion. The neoliberals have won a significant victory in this respect, and one can still find politicians arguing the case for less government intervention in the public sphere. The current government in the UK is yet again repeating the neoliberal line that there is too much regulation of business and is planning to scrap some of the existing controls. After the events of the credit crisis this beggars belief, and at such points it becomes necessary to voice objections. I am no advocate of a command economy style of government, but the effect of neoliberal deregulation is to leave us ever more exposed as individuals. We are in danger of seeing the public sector all but disappear if neoliberal thinking prevails, and that will lead to a decline in the quality of life for large sections of the population if it is carried through. The contract between government and citizens needs to be renegotiated constantly (that is what elections are for, after all), but there has to be something between us and the anarchy of the market, and governments are the only entities with the weight and authority to implement regulations protecting us. I see no evidence that the corporate sector will reform itself from within, nor accept its social responsibilities in any but the most superficial and cursory way.

I am neither an economist nor a scientist, and I realize that I have been encroaching into areas in which my knowledge and expertise is limited. My academic background is in philosophy as well as literary studies, and I tend to share an assumption common to many philosophers that it is a discipline which allows one to enter into other discourses and evaluate the arguments in play. Perhaps that is over-optimistic, but it was my primary objective in The End of Modernity (and the trilogy as a whole). The
more of us who are “exploring potential paths to a more egalitarian and environmentally sustainable future,” as John Peine puts it, whether specialists or generalists, the better. There is no one answer as to what we should do, much as we might wish there were. I have a feeling this is going to be a long haul and that we are probably still only at the ground-clearing stage of the exercise, but one has to start somewhere.

About the Author

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