

POST-MODERN THEMES IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF NICHOLAS BERDYAEV

By Mikhail Sergeev

Mikhail Sergeev is a native of Russia currently studying in the doctoral program at Temple University and teaching part-time at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia. This paper was chosen to be presented at the conference "The Ends of Post-Modernism" in Kirksville, Missouri, in September 1994.

1. Introduction

The works of the Russian philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev are world renowned and held in high esteem. His books have been translated into dozens of languages, and many studies of his thought have been done. Berdyaev is often considered a complicated, even a contradictory thinker who escapes simple definition. In his fundamental survey, A History of Russian Philosophy, V. Zenkovsky portrays him as a "neo-romantic."^{1/} In other literature he is usually labeled an existentialist philosopher. The focus of this paper is to re-visit Berdyaev's thought in the light of recent developments known as post-modernism in continental philosophy.

Post-modernism itself is a large and mostly debatable topic which has neither a canon nor an established history. The scope of the paper, therefore, will be limited to the examination of only those post-modern figures and trends which appear necessary for the subject. Similar restrictions will apply to Berdyaev's philosophical heritage. However preliminary, a comparing and contrasting of Berdyaev's thought with post-modernistic theories will serve as an invitation to further discussion of the topic.

2. General Observations

In order to approach the theme of post-modernism I want first to clarify what is meant by Modern Times. What indeed does the word "modernity" refer to? Some historians, including Berdyaev as we shall see, relate this concept to the Renaissance and the rejection of Medieval culture. Others restrict the notion of "modernity" to the Enlightenment with its own rejection of tradition. The most fervent defender of modernity, Jurgen Habermas, claims that the word "modern" has a much longer history going back to the distinction between the Ancients and the Moderns. He says,

in its Latin form "modernus" [it] was used for the first time in the late 5th century in order to distinguish the present, which had become officially Christian, from the Roman and pagan past.^{2/}

This transition from the old to the new, being quite essential for the concept of modernity, it is re-introduced, according to Habermas, each time the consciousness of a new epoch formed itself through a renewed relationship to the ancients - whenever, moreover, antiquity was considered a model to be recovered through some kind of imitation.^{3/}

This seems to be true of both the Renaissance and the Enlightenment (which is related by Habermas to "the project of modernity") as well as the following Romanticism which, in its turn, opposed the ideals of the classicists. A new stage in the radicalization of the modernist consciousness was reached when a recent historical epoch called "modernism" (to which Habermas assigns "the idea of modernity") emerged in the course of the 19th century.

According to this scheme, post-modernism comes next, and not only as a particular style, but also as a distinct historical period. Whatever happens in it is necessarily post-modern.

Moreover, this phase of the evolution of humankind itself includes different cultural and artistic styles not considered as having something common with antecedent civilizations, but rather as belonging only to contemporary times, and, therefore, unique in history.

3. Traits of Post-Modernism

The theme of modernism versus its possible successor, post-modernism, becomes then one of the central topics in recent philosophical debate. These discussions are mostly concerned with the origin, nature, characteristic features and future of both movements/periods in Western culture. When disputing these issues philosophers are divided into two main groups: those who defend (as Habermas does) the "incomplete project of modernity" against the attacks of post-modernists; and those who advocate the post-modern condition. The French scholar Jean-Francois Lyotard whose views are important in grasping the specificity of post-modernism, belongs to the second group.

Lyotard's position might be summarized in the following paradoxical way. Modernity, he argues, can be preserved only by the negation of itself. Doubt and critique lie at the very center of modern consciousness. Post-modernity, thus, re-presents a moment of perpetual self-negation which makes it intimately a part of modernity. However, post-modernity is by no means a final point, an end, a culmination or completion of modernity. The post-modern condition, Lyotard claims, is modernity in its nascent state, and this state is constant. A work can become modern only if it is first post-modern. In order to establish universal principles one should perpetually search for them in a situation free from any regimentation. A post-modern text is not in essence governed by preestablished rules. On the contrary, these rules constitute what the work itself is looking for. Post-modernism, then, Lyotard concludes, would have to be understood according to the logic of the future anterior./4/

This basic standpoint of post-modernism leads it to a harsh critique of modernity and especially of the project of the Enlightenment which operates with the notions and categories of the atemporal, objective - in one word, "scientific" - worldview. Post-modern thinkers attack the very idea of an "objective world" or "reality." They criticize modernists for basing their vocabularies on transcendent language, and they oppose the use of such terms as "substance," or "use-value."

The ultimate authority of science during the Enlightenment era becomes relativized in post-modern scientific discourse. Science is not seen as the Grand Narrative any more, but instead as one of the domains of knowledge with its special rules and prescriptions. When describing the characteristic features of the "scientific worldview" Lyotard declares that

the conditions of truth, in other words, the rules of the game of science, are immanent in that game, that they can only be established within the bonds of a debate that is already scientific in nature, and that there is no other proof hat the rules are good than the consensus extended to them by the experts./5/

Such a relativization of the idea of science is accompanied by a similar re-interpretation of the concept of history. The idea of the universality of history is appreciated by post-modern theorists only as an atavism of Modern Times. Modernity, they think, was over-preoccupied with constructing different philosophies of history. These philosophies in their turn gave rise to different ways of attaining social legitimation. Post-modernists insist on the essential impossibility of the "Grand Narratives" and wish to put an end to their influence. They reject the concept of linear progress in history, and consequently they deny meta-narrative methods of social legitimation by emphasizing an ideological multi-polarity. Lyotard expresses this tendency, for example, when he points out that the Grand Narrative regardless of the mode of unification it uses - speculative or emancipatory - has lost its credibility. Lyotard himself advocates "delegitimation" through the variety of equally acceptable language games. He argues that nobody can speak all of these languages. Hence, there is no possibility of a universal metalanguage.

This radical break not only with the traditional (pre-modern) religious worldview but also with the following pattern of modern scientific discourse leads post-modernists to stand for the final dispersion of any powers and authorities. According to their view, this process is accompanied by a further globalization and mechanization of social life. In the center remains the notion of information or a new phase of knowledge achieved by highly developed societies. As Lyotard points out,

[their] working hypothesis is that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age./6/

Post-modernism is often characterized as the ideology of a post-industrial society, "also designated [as an] information society, or high tech, and the like."/7/ In this short but precise formula given by an American historian of post-modernity, Frederick Jameson, these definitions are inter-related and inter-changeable. However, the last one, which points to a new level of technology and is connected with the flow of information, seems to be the key to the whole movement. It is remarkable that language is also the focus of post-modern theories. Language becomes important not because of its ordinary usage by people, but as a tool for the transmission of information. Artificial languages and computing programs conquer the space traditionally occupied by natural tools of

communication. Language is seen now primarily as a way and a symbol of such an interaction.

The main metaphor used by another French advocate of post-modernity, Baudrillard, to describe the post-modern condition is also that of the "information network," a network which emphasizes communication.^{/8/} However, it focuses on a communication which does not recognize any meaningful connection between the signifier and the signified. In such a communication "truth" is understood as a link of correspondence between two signifiers. This communication loses its relation to an external world and acquires a schizophrenic character.

Contemporary life, Baudrillard argues, might be compared not to a stage or mirror, but to such a network or screen. Our universe represents a TV or, more precisely, a control screen. What matters here is not performance, but regulation, or "well tempered functionality," as he puts it, compatibility of the elements of the system, control and global management of an ensemble. Another way to understand such a universe is to apply to it orbital and environmental models. Baudrillard calls it the satellization of the real or hyperrealism of simulation. An absolute space of simulation marks the beginning of the era of hyperreality which is the same as the end of metaphysics.

4. Berdyaev On History

By following my sketchy description of post-modernism one can distinguish three major driving forces of the post-modern condition. In my opinion, these are the factors of history, machine, and power, which were also the focus of Berdyaev's thought.

It is worth noting here that Berdyaev saw himself primarily as a philosopher of history. In one of his books he confesses that he dislikes history but has a deep intuition about the historical process.^{/9/} In another place he mentions that the construction of "historiosophic" systems, is perhaps the vocation of Russian philosophical tradition.^{/10/}

We live in a crucial epoch, he noted, when old and huge layers of civilization cease to exist and are replaced by new cultural formations which gradually come to life. Our age is the age of global turmoil and catastrophic changes which could be compared with the time of the decline of ancient civilization and the birth of Christianity. Russia appears to be the country most exposed to and endangered by these universal cataclysms. The peculiarity of modern Russian history which culminated in the incredible barbarisms of the communist revolution have made Russian thinkers very sensitive to the thunder of the present age.

On this general ground Berdyaev builds his own philosophy of history, although one which may have disappointed his post-modern successors. He apparently proposes his own version of the Grand Narrative when attempting to put historical occurrences into relative order. Berdyaev also would have criticized his post-modern opponents for their neglect and denial of the principle of Christian universalism. He begins his historiosophy, however, with one striking but remarkable assertion. He asks his critics not to judge his

philosophy from the standpoint of modernity. Modern Times, Berdyaev insists, have come to an end. He writes:

The spiritual foundations of modern history have vanished, its spiritual forces are exhausted. The rational day of modern history is ending, its sun is setting, the twilight is coming, we are approaching the night time. All the categories of the sunny day which already has been lived through are worthless to look into the events and phenomena of our evening historical hour./11/

The end of Modern Times or the coming of the "night" in the history of humanity is related, for Berdyaev, to the "processes which are directed toward the overcoming of national exclusiveness and the formation of universal unity"./12/ The night of history is neither worse nor better than the preceding day period. Oversimplifying evaluations cannot be applied to the hidden mysteries of the destiny of humanity. The night is deeper, more ontological. During the night, people are getting in touch with the foundations of life; and they are more concentrated on intense spiritual training and the internal problems of existence. During the following day they master the accumulated energy, they apply their inner experience to the external world, and explore the joys of life.

The Middle Ages was such a night in the history of European nations. It was not just the dark ages of religious fanaticism, social inequality and scientific ignorance. It was also an age of enormous spiritual intensity, a working toward integrity, and an aspiration toward a high common ideal. The potentials which were joined together during the Middle Ages gave rise to the Renaissance which marked, according to the logic of Berdyaev's scheme, the start of the "day" epoch in Europe. The subsequent cultural movements of classicism and the Enlightenment explored in depth the main intuitions of the Renaissance which proclaimed the liberation of human beings and their future complete independence from the forces of nature.

Berdyaev argues that the essence of the historical process consists of the relation of the human spirit to nature. He distinguishes three stages in this relationship. The primary pre-Christian or pagan period is characterized by a deep union of the spirit with the forces of nature. The second, Christian stage, on the other hand, is marked by the heroic struggle of the spirit against nature as a source of sin. Finally, a new turn of the human spirit toward nature begins with the Renaissance. Dominance over the blind forces of nature in the name of human interests and prosperity becomes the main goal of this stage. The new humanism finds its first expression in the arts and sciences. Later it affects all spheres of culture, even including religion.

The whole of modernity, Berdyaev continues, was such a Renaissance in human history, a period which

stands by the mark of liberation of the creative human powers, of spiritual decentralization, an alienation from the spiritual center, the differentiation of all the spheres of social and cultural life, when all the domains of human culture become autonomous. Science, art, the life of the state, economic life, the whole of society and the

whole of culture are autonomous. This process of differentiation and autonomization is what is called the secularization of human culture./13/

However, following the dialectics of the Renaissance, Berdyaev concludes, the self-affirmation of the human being leads to self-destruction of the human, the release of a free play of human powers not connected with a higher goal leads to a diminishment of creativity./14/

The rights of humans which ignore the rights of God results in self-denial and self-destruction rather than liberation. Berdyaev notes that,

that which in the Renaissance was occurring in science and art, that which in the Reformation was occurring in religious life, that which in the epoch of the Enlightenment was happening in the sphere of reason, must have been transferred into social communal action./15/

The faith that a human being as a natural creature might freely change the course of history, re-organize human society, and realize the right to freedom has ended with the experiment in revolutions. After the French revolution of the 18th century, people discovered that revolutions are powerless to fulfill their missions. The noble task of establishing human liberty was being reversed into cruel tyrannies and the profanation of humanity. Revolutions uncover the dualism of the Renaissancian ideals and reveal the abyss toward which it has driven civilization. The Russian revolution of 1917 with its apocalyptic horrors has put a tragic dilemma before humanity. Culture cannot remain neutral any more; the movement from God turns into the struggle against God. In this sense the Russian revolution does not belong to the Modern Times. It opens up another era which Berdyaev by analogy calls the "New Middle Ages" and in which the decisive choice between the Devil and God must be made.

5. Entry of the Machine

Berdyaev sees in the invention of machinery a decisive turning point from the Renaissance (in a broad sense) with its affection for natural man to a new overcoming of the natural elements in humanity . In his book the Crisis of Art he writes:

The machine entered this world victoriously and disturbed the everlasting harmony of organic life. Since this revolutionary event everything has changed in human life, all has been broken in it. . . The rhythm of the organic flesh in the life of the world has been disturbed. Life was cut off from its organic roots. The organic flesh is being substituted by the machine; organic development finds its end in the mechanism. Machinization and mechanization is a fateful irresistible cosmic process... [it] must be understood as dematerialization, as the scattering of the flesh of the world, the sprawling of the material structure of the cosmos. /16/

The machine occupies a place between nature and humans. On the one hand, it liberates humans by conquering the forces of nature. On the other hand, while enriching humanity,

it also creates a new form of slavery, a dependence upon the machine. The power of the machine, which is neither natural nor human, divides the latter from the former by decomposing all that is natural in human beings. The epoch of the Renaissance which produced the invention of machinery turns out to be its own negation. The natural humanism of the Renaissance reaches its limits beyond which the opposite process of the de-humanization of humanity begins to happen.

All the foundations of traditional culture are now being shaken. It becomes clear that capitalistic democracies do not differ essentially from totalitarian socialist countries. Socialism, Berdyaev argues, is but to push to an extreme the basic principles of Modern Times. It is a realization of the Kingdom of Man without God, and, therefore, paradoxically without man himself. Freedom without God leads necessarily to freedom from God. The final choice between the union with Christ or the brotherhood of the Antichrist cannot be postponed any longer. As Berdyaev insists, the ultimate struggle of good and evil is the tragic fate of this stage of universal history. The final polarization of good and evil introduces the theme of Apocalypse which was present already in Christian sacred scriptures.

Berdyaev argues, therefore, that the "spiritual center of the coming epoch might be only the Church (Christian Church - M.S.) as in the Middle Ages."/17/ He writes:

The New Middle Ages will inevitably be national (*narodno*-M.S.) in the highest degree, but not at all democratic. . . An old legitimation is dead; it belonged to Modern history and to pursue its restoration is to chase a ghost. The monarchies of the New Middle Ages will not be the monarchies of a formal-legitimistic character. The principle of social realism in them will prevail over the principle of juridical formalism . . . the power will be strong, often dictatorial./18/

The New Middle Ages will by no means be peaceful, Berdyaev concludes. We enter the age of great battles when wars will be sacred and religious, rather than purely political or national.

6. Final Remarks

To describe the school of thought which follows modernism, contemporary scholars use two seemingly inter-changeable words, namely, post-modernism and post-modernity. I would suggest, however, a distinction between the former and the latter. Let the term "post-modernism" stand for a movement which rejects modernism, radicalizes its ideas, but nevertheless constitutes a part of Modernity understood in a Habermasian sense. On the other hand, the idea of "post-modernity" might be used to characterize a radical break with Modernity itself.

Most of the pioneers of the post-modern condition defend post-modernism even when making stronger claims about a new era of post-modernity. This is especially true about Berdyaev whose thought is rooted in and centered around Christianity. Berdyaev shares with his post-modern colleagues many other assumptions. For example, his approach to

the project of the Enlightenment as well as his critique of the idea of progress, "scientific worldview," "natural humanism" and corresponding ways of social legitimation are surprisingly close to the doctrines which have been developed by contemporary post-modern thinkers.

There is, however, a remarkable difference between them and Berdyaev. It is reflected in how Berdyaev sees the role of religion in the post-modern age. He obviously connects the New Middle Ages (the post-modern condition, in his terms) with the revival of religion, especially Christianity. In Berdyaev's opinion, modernity is not homogeneous for it necessarily comes to its own negation. A "peaceful" coexistence of secular democracies with right or left-wing totalitarian states already goes beyond the borders of Modern Times. Berdyaev foresees the appearance in the future of new totalitarian powers built upon religious foundations. The recent resurgence of Islam, the war in the former Yugoslavia and the rise of fundamentalist ideologies throughout the world might well be the first fulfillments of such a dramatic forecast.

NOTES

1. See Zenkovsky, Vasilii. A History of Russian Philosophy, vol.2, Part IY, Ch.II.
2. Habermas, Jurgen. "Modernity - An Incomplete Project," in The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays On Post-Modern Culture, edited by Foster, H., Port Townsend, Washington, 1983, p.3.
3. Ibid., p.4.
4. For more details see such Lyotard's works as The Differend: Phrases in Dispute, The Postmodern Condition: A Report On Knowledge, and The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence 1982- 1985. All of them have been published in English by the University of Minnesota Press.
5. Lyotard, Jean-Francois. The Postmodern Condition: A Report On Knowledge, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991, p.29.
6. Ibid., p.3.
7. Jameson, Frederick. Postmodernism or Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Duke University Press, Durham, 1991, p.3.
8. In the following passages I use Baudrillard's essay, "The Ecstasy of Communication," which was published in The Anti- Aesthetic: Essays On Post-Modern Culture, edited by Foster, H.
9. See: Berdyaev, Nicolas. Self-Knowing: An Essay in Autobiography, YMCA-Press, 1949, p.274.

10. See: Berdyaev, Nicolas. Preface to The Meaning of History, Mysl', Moscow, 1990 (1st edition in Paris, YMCA-Press, 1969).

11. Berdyaev, Nicolas. New Middle Ages: Meditation On the Destiny of Russia and Europe. Phoenix, Moscow, 1991, pp.5-6. /All translations from the Russian are made by the author of the paper/.

12. Ibid., p.22.

13. Berdyaev, Nicolas. The Meaning of History, Mysl', Moscow, 1990, p.102.

14. Ibid., p.110.

15. Ibid., p.113.

16. Berdyaev, Nicolas. The Crisis of Art, published by Lemen and Sakharov, Moscow, 1918 (reprinted in 1990), pp.13-14.

17. New Middle Ages, p.27.

18. Ibid., pp.30-31.