
Musings on Postmodern Politics

Eugene McCarthy

I have for some time been vaguely aware that in the higher levels of culture—art, music, poetry, etc.—we have been moving out of the age of “modernism” into a new age or era, labelled “postmodernism.”

The term gave me some trouble. “Modernism,” to me, had always indicated the “now,” and could never be “post,” unless the word was to be fixed, as having no future use. There could never be a “post modernism.” The line has been broken. We may look forward to “new-modernism,” or “neo-modernism,” possibly “neo-neo modernism,” or possibly indicate new eras and ages, as we do Stallone movies, as “Modernism” No. I, No. II, etc.

Then, I learned that we in the United States are in a postmodern political era. This took me somewhat by surprise. The politics of most of the “modern” era had been a mixed bag of democracy, communism, fascism, and colonialism with a polarization into two camps, communism and capitalistic democracy, following the end of World War II. With the breakup

of the Soviet Union and the general abandonment of communism, some political observers said we were back to the end of World War II, others back to the beginning of World War II. None of these early analysts identified the beginning of a postmodern age of politics that now is upon us or that we are in.

Since I can find no orderly or systematic exposition of postmodern politics, even from those who say they are practicing it, I have been trying to define it by noting differences between current and past politics, hoping that, as in the method of music-minus-one, a melody may emerge. Assuming that the Marxist theory of thesis and antithesis, leading to synthesis, no longer applies, we are left with an open-ended society and politics. This predicament is not altogether reassuring as it may lead us to a state of “entropy,” i.e., of randomness, chaos and disorder, with little basis for optimism as to what may result, beyond that which may be drawn from the finding of the com-

puter genius who sought to create chaos in an advanced computer, only to be frustrated when, just as he thought he was to accomplish his goal, signs and patterns of order began to emerge.

What will emerge is not clear. It is not even clear whether we will be able to identify or describe the new order even after it has emerged. The logic of "postmodernism" is not, I have learned, traditional or Aristotelian. It is what computer experts call "fuzzy logic," the logic of the computer which, under some circumstances, is said to be more reliable, at least in the short run, than classical, rational logic.

The strength of the new logic lies in the fact that it uses, or manipulates, imprecise facts (non-facts), or what may or may not be a fact but an impression (a word once used by a Reagan aide to explain a presidential misstatement), an act which, although unnoted, may have marked the historical beginning of "postmodern" politics. Everything in the new logic is approached as a matter of degree. Key words are not absolutes, like black and white, or hot or cold, but gray, or cool, and the like.

Consistent with this use of language, President Carter described what some called a failure in the attempted rescue of the American hostages held in Iran (they were not rescued) as an "incomplete success." It might as well have been described as a "partial failure." These early indications of unrecognized "postmodernism" in both the Reagan and Carter administrations, obscured by the deconstructionism (linguistic and po-

litical) of the Bush administration, should have forewarned us of a new politics, which is becoming more clearly manifest in the Clinton administration.

Postmodern politics has several distinguishing marks. It is indifferent to tradition. Persons in the new politics are unlikely to have had the experience of participating in satisfying and sustaining history. They missed the days of high patriotism and sacrifice of World War II and came to political awareness during the years of the Vietnam War, many experiencing the distressing and difficult test of patriotism, as in the case of President Clinton.

Postmodern politics discounts loyalty and personal relationships. Appointment to office, and also elections, which used to reflect cultural and personal differences such as religion and nationality, are more likely to depend on physical or physiological or biological differences, such as race, sex, or accident of time of birth (a generation). When Zoë Baird looked for help in her difficulty after being nominated to be attorney general by President Clinton, she found no personal support even from the president, but only the depersonalized support of generation and the female sex. Her situation moved one political writer with historical memory to report a pre-postmodern rule of Chicago Democratic politics (a rule probably still in effect in Chicago) which said, "Don't send us nobody that nobody sent."

Postmodern politicians and persons are not lonely. They have not known community, many of them—

not the community of family, not family loyalty, or loyalty to place, to city or town, or to employers or corporations, or even loyalty to baseball teams. They are isolated. There are more exiles and refugees than there are retirees. Many are like the child in the airport, smiling too readily, too soon or too long, bearing a name tag with both a return and a forwarding address.

Postmoderns are not greedy as charged. They are insecure, seeking security in making "more," and in using "more," rather than having "more." Their music is rap, instant in composition and in performance, impromptu, produced and consumed in one disposable presentation. Postmodern persons are more likely to say, "I represent," or "I am a client," than "I am." They spend a lot of time redefining themselves, and looking for new meaning. They have many friends who seem to be, without graduation, not just "friends" but all Best Friends. There seem to be no casual friends or former friends, and all are "mutual," shared with others like investments in a mutual fund.

They are advocates and practitioners of zero-based thinking. I tried it once and passed right through the zero mark into the range of sub-zero thinking. The climb back was too difficult. I now try to start thinking not only above zero but well above the freezing point.

Postmoderns believe that life and politics, both, can be reduced to "problems" and "solutions." They say

things like, "If you do not know what the problem is, you are part of it." They are not only "problem solvers" but "problem finders." Political campaigns and offices have "issues persons." Meetings are advanced by the use of "facilitators," and proposals are challenged not by the traditional "devil's advocate" but by "contrarians."

Postmoderns are quite free with language. They make nouns into verbs, like "expense," and then, for general use, into gerunds. Men used to "father" a child and then become a father and also a parent. Women would have a child and then become a mother and mother the child. Husbands and wives now "parent" their children. Books on "parenting" are popular.

Postmoderns quantify and extrapolate, and, without history but with fuzzy logic, are the power in "postmodern" politics. As David Gergen said on his joining the Clinton administration, he himself became more "centered." He "intersected" with members of the administration, and "bonded" with them, and experienced a "psychic return."

And, as Leon Weiseltier wrote in *The New Republic* (July 1993), the postmodern politician, as demonstrated in President Clinton, is not marked by nonbelief but by belief in everything, a belief which eliminates the rule of contradiction and leaves one with only one working principle—belief in "Process."