

*The Politics of Postmodernity*. Ed. James Good and Irving Velody. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Hermínio Martins. *Classe, Status e Poder*. Lisbon: ICS, 1998.

Carlos Leone

From a continental standpoint, although not a French one, there are some unavoidable perplexities concerning the debate about postmodernity in the Anglo-American context. The gap between the concept and the social reality it aims to address on the one hand, and the debate itself on the other, stands out most prominently. Twenty years since the publication of Jean-François Lyotard's *Rapport sur le savoir*, the debate on the Continent (predominantly staged in France, Germany, and Italy) revisited the classical dispute between philosophers and sophists in the form of the confrontation between Habermas vs. Lyotard (with a sort of quasi-aristotelian stance in an essay by Karl-Otto Apel). However, in the English-speaking world, things became autonomous—as it usually happens—in a very particular way. On the Continent the discussion was primarily academic, centered in the social sciences, and only later on evolved to the press in a quite irrelevant way—maybe because the *gauchisme* of the continental press was a real opponent to the skepticism inherent in suspicions towards *grands récits*. Curiously, this strangeness to continental ideology proved to be totally absent in the reception of Lyotard's essay on the Anglo-American circuit, where the notion of “postmodern condition” soon became associated with, but unrelated to, a number of theories and concepts originating from French authors like Derrida (deconstruction) and Foucault (*episteme*). The problem is that postmodernity turns out to be a very pervasive notion, much more so than the others I mentioned and, consequently, its meaning became equivocal.

The key point is this: the postmodern condition is one of modernity, that is to say, a condition of knowledge (*savoir*) in modern western societies. Lyotard characterized it through a constant attention to the expanding information flow within western industrialized societies that would gradually predominate over the possession of capital. I'm cutting it short, but I trust that I am keeping in terms with Lyotard's viewpoint. This would inevitably put under serious stress the all-encompassing *grands récits* that legitimized the very societies where these changes occur. All of this must sound familiar in the days of the global economy, the internet, and other undisputed realities

of the same modern societies based on an essentially liberal conception of politics and social organization—the only ones that allow these changes to take place effectively and peacefully. Unfortunately, this interpretation of modern societies was appropriated in the English-speaking world by the impenitent drive for theoretical support in French thinking consistently carried out through the years by feminists, cultural studies gurus, and so on. Just the same way Derrida's deconstruction became a *methodism* in the U.S., the postmodern condition became postmodernism, as if something called "modernity" had simply ended and something else showed up to take its place posthumously. At this point, I should recognize that this is a misinterpretation of the postmodern condition of knowledge also current on the Continent. In Europe, however, the discussion has been for a long time kinder, gentler, and almost imperceptible. Thus, the effects of this are far more visible in the Anglo-American world, as the Sokal affair so eloquently reiterates, with a resonance almost entirely limited to France and French-dependent cultures like, say, Portugal.

So, if this is a valid standpoint, we could describe the picture in terms of a continent where postmodernity has been a minor matter for a long time and an English-speaking world where it has become overstressed, has obtained a specific identity, and has been internalized in academic disputes (again, the Sokal affair is a perfect example). In this process, one might add, postmodernism reproduces some of the more well-established *clichés* concerning the differences between the Anglo-American tradition of philosophy (more analytical and empirical) and its continental counterpart (more literary and speculative). A good case for sustaining this perspective is *The Politics of Postmodernity*, edited by James Good and Irving Velody. Both in its structure and in its underlying assumptions, this book is pinned to the framework of an English-like postmodernity—and surely a very good one at that. It comes from a well-known topic, the reference to a crisis, ironically one of those dramatic events that one of the few thinkers of Anglo-American provenance with a good grasp of the Continent's activity (Richard Rorty) so frequently urges us to abandon. Thus, the editors tell us that "the crisis in the political is very much an aspect of crises of interpretation and representation in the social sciences. That is to say, the crisis in the political is but one dimension of a more general sense of disintegration in the human sciences." To deal with this particular dimension, we find an impressive list of contributors, forming a volume "which essentially presumes the death of the foundational approach

to political analysis and offers a variety of new perspectives to look forward to the postmodern social world.” It is frequent but nonetheless ironic that the foundational approach should be associated with modernity—after all, modernity (above all the Enlightenment) aimed to cut itself loose from the theological foundations that preceded it. Anyway, the real problem with this approach to postmodernity is by now recognizable: is there any connection in linking this momentous view of modernity (crises, disintegration, death, etc.) and the analysis in the report written by Lyotard for the Canadian government? Isn’t it an approach more akin to those bombastic diagnoses of scientific revolutions and the like? If we look back at the history of philosophy, we find (as in that of theology or religion) the announcement of “crises” to be a constant feature, by that designation or by several others (on this subject, by the way, Derrida has an interesting work, published by Galilée in 1983 under the title *D’un ton apocalyptique adopté naguère en philosophie*). As a matter of fact, crisis is the greater grand récit in the history of philosophy and is responsible for some of its most impressive works, like Husserl’s *Krisis*. So, *in nuce*, the crisis pretext is neither original nor specifically postmodern.

At any rate, *The Politics of Postmodernity* is a valuable work. Carefully presented by its editors, the book contains a general introduction and short presentations of each of its three parts, and gathers papers from Quentin Skinner, Zygmunt Bauman, and several other scholars. In a well-reasoned effort to be balanced, the volume also includes a chapter by the outstanding non-postmodernist Raymond Plant. Structured in an efficient, conventional fashion, the first part of the book deals with modernity, the second with the critique of its political thought, and the last ventures into “Technology and the Politics of Culture,” which presumably corresponds to “the task of our generation to give some coherence and direction to the kind of world the year 2000 will bring, the kind of world the makers of this book and its readers will have helped to create.” Symptomatically, the very chronological display of the three parts reveals a purely modern understanding of time as continuing progress now transported to the postmodern condition, another frequent shortcoming of current postmodernism.

Besides that, the book also reveals the implication of the postmodern condition of knowledge with issues hardly related to it, again by association with other French authors, like in the case of Diana Coole’s Foucault-inspired postmodern feminism on the ground of the masculinity of modern grand récits. In a way, the emblematic text of the book is, all things considered,

David E. Cooper's "Postmodernity and 'The End of Philosophy,'" a fairly illustrative summa of all these questions. In his contribution, Cooper upholds the usual aspiration of English-speaking postmodernists to a new and unparalleled radicalism, in which the critique of the "depth" of built-in truth or truth-like theories of modernity draws its power from a "spirit which imbues the general culture of postmodernism." As if it were necessary, the symbolic return of one of the most obvious *grands récits* radically cuts against the traditional aspiration to truth (and as if modernity hadn't established itself against tradition's *auctoritas*).

At this point, we might ask what is Hermínio Martins's relation to this English form of the postmodern condition. In the opening of Part III of the book, his text on "Technology, Modernity, and Politics" stands out by its amiability towards traditions. He writes about two traditions, both of them related to a modern-now-postmodern theme of "domination of nature" and attempting to "bring out the sharp differences between two ideal-typical traditions, the Promethean (particularly marked in the wake of the French Revolution) and the Faustian (culminating in the work of the single most influential contemporary philosopher of technology, Heidegger)." This attention to traditions within a postmodern discussion (that of technology, on which Martins has written consistently in recent years) is decisive, as it reflects the critique of the caesurism (a notion put forward by Martins himself in his essay "Time and Theory in Sociology," in *Approaches to Sociology*, edited by John Rex in 1974) present in all the Anglo-American forms of postmodernism. However, the effort to question the apparently obvious revolutionary, caesura-like nature of (post)modern politics, and to rehearse an alternative to it, stands out more clearly in another of his works that also reveals the scope of the work to be done on modernity in the present postmodern condition. I'm referring to a volume of essays on contemporary Portugal entitled *Classe, Status e Poder (Class, Status and Power)*, just issued by ICS, a new Portuguese academic press.

As Hermínio Martins himself notices in his introduction to this book, there is a connection between the more theoretical analysis of the sort of "Time and Theory in Sociology" or "Technology, Modernity, Politics" and his more empirical essays, such as those collected in *Classe, Status e Poder* (with the exception of the last of these, the one which entitles the volume, as it is extremely theory-laden by comparison with the others). Here we find a Portuguese version of texts already published in English in several collections,



all of them on the subject of Portuguese politics and society prior to the current democratic regime established in 1974. This is a valuable contribution to the understanding of what I mentioned above about the work to be done on modernity: written by a Portuguese exiled in England, it offers something extremely rare in Portuguese-related works—an ability to make them part of the Western framework of political studies. Teaching abroad and deprived of access to most of the data usually consulted in this line of research, Martins wrote what is even today an accurate description and evaluation of (1) the democracy overthrown in 1926; (2) the regime of Salazar and Caetano; (3) the opposition to that regime; and (4) the structure of Portuguese metropolitan society until 1974. At the very least, this is a remarkable achievement, but there is something else more relevant to my point.

The interest of a book such as this in the context of postmodern politics is that it brings out the fact that much, and perhaps most, of the work on modernity is still waiting to be done; the postmodern condition, moreover, with its free flow of information, is the appropriate time to do it. The Portuguese case examined by Martins is only one of the many all over the world that display the tensions and contrasts that make modernity in such a binding way that even the postmodern condition did not put an end to them. That is why the analyses in these essays are almost entirely valid today. The simple possibility of access to works like *Classe, Status e Poder* is in itself an indicator of social modernity, as it is proven by their publication in English much earlier than in Portuguese editions. And it is this existence of modernity, simultaneous with what is premodern and postmodern, this idiosyncratic capacity of modernity to endure prolonged, unresolved, and even ignored tensions within itself, that should constitute a serious reason to reassess the meaning and use(s) of the notion that Lyotard made famous.

Of course (or in Derrida's way of saying it, of course) it is highly unlikely that such a reassessment will ever take place. As long as polemics such as the Sokal affair set the pace, I tend to sympathize with Rorty's suggestion simply to discard the use of the word "postmodernity" altogether. Nevertheless, and despite all the noise around postmodernism, it is evident that the works such as those of Hermínio Martins, Hans Jonas, Niklas Luhmann, and precisely those above the wrestling of modernists and postmodernists will remain in the future as a legacy of our days.