REALITY
Isn't What It Used to Be

Theatrical Politics, Ready-to-Wear Religion,
Global Myths, Primitive Chic, and Other Wonders of the
Postmodern World

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The Emergent Fiction

The world, says director Jonathan Miller, is an “emergent fiction,” something that, like artists, we fabricate anew in every moment of our lives. That is meant to be a description of individual experience, but it applies equally well to what happens to social groups, anything from small communities to the entire human species, as they create and re-create the realities that are common to all their members.

We all share the good fortune—or the misfortune, depending on how you look at it—of being present at a great historical evolutionary event: we are seeing now the emergence of a social reality that is different in important ways from anything we have known before, the first global civilization. To say that we are “seeing” it is a bit of a strained metaphor, however; it’s not that easy to see.

When we look for evidence that we are indeed moving out of international barbarism, making the transition from global theater to global polis, we are inevitably influenced by our preexisting mental models of what a civilization is: we think of the Greek or Roman civilizations of the past, or of the Western or Islamic civilizations of the present. It is very hard—in fact impossible—to know what to look for when the thing we are trying to observe and define has never existed, when nothing of its class has ever existed. Global civilization will have to accommodate and include all the present civilizations and cultures and nations. It will take its form in a post-modern world in which beliefs about belief—definitely including all the ideologies and religions and cultures that have supported past and present civilizations—have changed, and are changing. And it will be a social construction of reality.

People sometimes get drunk on the idea of social construction of reality and—when they apply it to the subject of global civilization—leap to the grandiose assumption that somehow we
can sit down today and make up tomorrow’s world. That delusion animates the more militant adherents of various global stories such as those I enumerated in the past chapter, the worst sort of futurism and much New Age foolishness. I have been present at meetings of faction-ridden little groups of a couple of dozen people who fancied they were shaping the future of human thought.

But even the creation of personal experience is a collaborative effort, with evolution and history and all our parents and peers doing their part to help each of us assemble the emergent fiction of the moment. And the manufacture of social reality is an even more crowded operation: no matter how often we repeat the platitude that the future is what we make it, we find much of it being made in mysterious ways, ways that elude our agendas, ways that stretch far back into the past. Huge historical forces march through our time: the future is being shaped by the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution; by population growth and global environmental changes; by God knows how many different people and groups with God knows how many different ideas of what they are doing and why. The more skillful we become at creating social realities, the more we get into the business and the more realities we create. And our deliberate reality-creating, future-making, civilization-building projects always turn out to have unexpected consequences: no plan of social action, and certainly no revolution, has failed to surprise its creators. Much of what happens is the product of actions that people set in motion without explicit reality-creating agendas, but that turn out to have them anyway. The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas—one of the great theoreticians on the subject we are discussing here—writes of systems “colonizing the lifeworld”; that is, impersonal systems created for the purpose of merely “getting things done”—such as markets and bureaucracies—lead to changes in values and beliefs that are necessary in order to make the systems work more effectively.  

And so we hope and blunder our way into the future, world-makers in spite of ourselves. Things change, and the way things change changes, and we try to build a global polis at the same time that we realize (a) that we don’t know how to create social reality, and (b) that we don’t know how not to.

GLIMPSES OF A ZEITGEIST: FIVE METATRENDS

The belief-about-belief that I (somewhat reluctantly) call the postmodern worldview is not all by itself terribly revolutionary, nor terribly difficult for the average person to begin to understand, nor even, in a certain sense, new. Many cultural traditions have had ideas about the illusory nature of belief, and many people have written and thought about the “culture shock” experiences of encountering other people with different worldviews. I suspect, in fact, that if you penetrate deeply enough into the belief system of any society—even a premodern society with no highly developed consciousness of having a belief system—you will find hints of a shadow side, rituals and customs that secretly mock the society’s own truths and customs. You will find humor, and humor is our universal way of pushing pinholes in public reality. I suspect that although the ideas I call a postmodern worldview are only now emerging into the sunlight, they have been there always in the background as people have inhabited their symbolic universes, constructed their realities, and occasionally laughed at themselves.

What is new is the pervasiveness of such ideas, and the willingness of so many people to state them clearly. We see postmodern thought emerging from countless different directions—transforming different cultures, belief systems, and intellectual disciplines.

The postmodern worldview is becoming the zeitgeist, as modernism was in past centuries. It will be a central element in the global culture, but it is hardly likely to be universally accepted in any explicit form or to unite all people; it will be central as a global theme around which people will differ and disagree. Here and there, it will probably appear as something like an ideology. In the past, there were some who understood and embraced modernism—the philosophes of the Enlightenment come to mind—and gave it a distinct energy and identity. Others embraced modernism but did not understand it; still others understood it but did not embrace it. And some did not get the news at all, or at least not until much later; there are still societies that have been scarcely touched by the modern age. But nobody will be untouched by the postmodern age. For the first time, things are happening to the entire human species at once. And we know it; the knowing is one of the most important things that is happening.
It would be best if postmodernism were widely understood, explicitly understood, debated, and worked through by everybody—but it probably won’t be, and many people will be more battered by cultural changes and political innovations and strange shifts of morality and lifestyle than they might have been. The shift to postmodernism is far more likely to be traumatic if you are convinced that there can be no truth without absolutes, no science without objectivity, no morality without rules, no society without uniform values and beliefs, no religion without a church. Obviously many people hold such convictions—or are trying to. And yet, if you look at all the games that are being played with belief systems such as Christianity and Marxism, it is equally obvious that a sense of the postmodern condition is springing up in the minds of many people who have no name for it—and no idea at all that they are feeling and thinking about life and organizing their experience in profoundly different new ways.

Let me identify some of the new ways. Following are five fundamental characteristics of the postmodern worldview, ways of looking at reality/unreality that are evident in actions people are taking in relation to politics, religion, and culture. I call them metatrends, because we experience them not merely as changes, but as changes in the way things change. I offer them as part manifesto: diagnosis because they are important but relatively little-noticed aspects of what is going on in our time, and manifesto because I believe we can function more honestly and effectively if we identify and understand these processes so we can use them and not merely be affected by them. The five are (1) changes in thinking-about-thinking (shifts in the public psychology); (2) changes in identity and boundaries; (3) changes in learning; (4) changes in morals, ethics, and values; and (5) changes in relationship to traditions, customs, and institutions.

First, thinking-about-thinking. We can see a growing awareness of the multidimensional, relativistic quality of human experience. This is expressed in many ways: in psychological concepts such as Minsky’s society of mind, in theories about multiple personalities and subpersonalities, in Westernizing spiritual traditions such as Buddhism, and in literary images such as Salman Rushdie’s idea of mental channel hopping.

The most important part of this is thinking-about-thinking itself.

reflexivity: the mind’s ability to see itself, and to see itself seeing itself. At a high level of intellectual discourse, the notion of self-reflexivity has become in this century a tool for criticizing (and deconstructing) grand philosophical systems. A leading constructionist, Paul Watzlawick of Stanford, writes:

As audacious and powerful as the most sublime philosophical edifice may be, as much as it may appear to be an iron-clad system, it nevertheless has a fatal flaw: It cannot prove its own logic and freedom from contradiction from within itself. This fundamental condition for the logical construction of every reality we create has been most thoroughly researched by the mathematicians—above all by Kurt Gödel—and their results are valid for all thought systems having a complexity that corresponds at least to that of arithmetic. In order to establish its freedom from contradiction, it is unavoidable that the given system step out of its own conceptual framework to demonstrate its consistency from without by using interpretive principles that it cannot generate from within... and so on ad infinitum.3

This recognition involves two of the main keys to postmodern thought: the admission that all explanations of reality are themselves constructions—human, useful, but not perfect—and the ability to “step out” of reality constructs and see them as such.

The stepping out is the whole theme of Douglas Hofstadter’s Gödel, Escher, Bach, in which he shows the mind seeing itself in mathematics, music, and art. The Dutch graphic artist M.C. Escher illustrates the idea of reflexivity so beautifully, in so many ways—such as his famous drawing of a hand that is drawing a hand that is drawing the hand—that they are suitable for the symbols of our time, iconoclastic icons of the postmodern era.

Because stepping out is what we all do, all the time; it is the characteristic action of the postmodern era. It is performed with equal regularity by objectivists and constructivists, right-wingers and left-wingers, revisionists and fundamentalists. The Reverend W. A. Criswell, whom we met in chapter 1, steps out when he tells Bill Moyers that the Bible is the final authority for everything. What is his authority for saying the Bible is the final authority? Does it say that in the Bible? If it does, isn’t that using a system to prove itself? If it doesn’t, isn’t he being an errant fundamentalist by relying on another authority?
Anthropologists step out of their cultures to study other cultures, and the people they study step out by describing their culture to anthropologists. We step out of good old American values when we attack them, and we step out when we defend them. We step out of myth when we talk about creating new ones. We step out of language when we deconstruct it, or oppose deconstructing it. To live in a pluralistic world, and to think about how to live in it, is to be continually required to step out.

As we let go of the modern era's idea of progress (everything gets better) we may develop a postmodern idea of it as ever-increasing reflexivity, each era of history seeing previous eras and seeing itself, the individual mind more capable of thinking about its thought. All of postmodernism, in fact, can be summarized as looking at beliefs—including one's own.

As such concepts become more commonly accepted and disseminated, whether through art or cognitive science or popular culture, they become available to us as templates for personal experience. Just as (according to Kuhn's account) a new scientific paradigm sometimes enables researchers to accept and understand observations/data that they might previously have ignored, a new public idea of what human consciousness is supposed to be like enables people to organize private experience differently—perhaps to notice, accept, and understand thoughts or feelings that might previously have been overlooked or repressed; perhaps to understand events in new ways. An experience that a premodern person might have understood as possession by an evil spirit might be understood by a modern psychoanalytic patient as more mischief from the Id, and might be understood by a postmodern individual as a subpersonality making itself heard—might even, if you want to get really postmodern about it, be recognized as all three.

Second, and following from the above, people develop a different sense of identity and boundaries. We live in the age of the fading boundary, the twilight of a mind-set that structured reality with sharp lines. The boundaries between nations, races, classes, cultures, species—all become less distinct. Plenty of people of course try to maintain the old boundaries. The United States government is currently digging a moat along the Mexican border and has invested millions in Star Wars research—the latter an attempt to maintain a national boundary in space. Racists continue to oppose the mixing of black and white, aristocrats mourn the breakdown of the old class hierarchies, culture-preservers fret about the dilution into globalism of French haute couture or the traditions of primitive peoples. Anti-biotechnology crusaders yearn to legislate the genetic purity of species. Expect many such reactionary efforts—but boundary lines are not what they used to be, either in thought or in practice.

And for most of us, one-dimensional social identities are not what they used to be either. They are simply not adequate to our self-concepts or to the situations in which we function. It is hard for the average contemporary person—especially in the West—to understand what a complete and final delineator of the self class once was, and it is becoming equally difficult for many people to maintain their attachment to any of the ethnic, national, religious, or other cards of identity that have been so essential to social reality in the past. Some people get a lot out of being Jewish or English or American Indian, and some don't. We all make choices about how seriously we take such identities, and many of us make choices about the identities themselves. A world in which religious conversion is commonplace and millions of people change nationalities is a different world for everybody in it—definitely including those who make no such outward change. It is a world in which the boundaries between religions and nationalities are seen to be artificial and movable.

Most people need some public identifier, some anchor to a historical tradition and a recognized group. Some of us obviously need it more than others, but even enlightened Buddhists seem to want to let you know they are Buddhists. More and more, we find it suitable to identify ourselves with more than one term. Multiple identity becomes a common feature of postmodern life. Whenever we describe ourselves, we should add "etc."

America is probably the leading multiple-identity society, with its growing numbers of Hispanic Americans and Asian Americans and all its older ethnic groups who have still not entirely dehyphenated. But multiple-identity people can now be found everywhere. Life is often difficult for them, as Salman Rushdie's travails dramatized for the world. Their existence is a threat to those who wish to preserve the integrity of the single-identity groups that traditionally gave everybody a sure sense of what they belonged to and who they were expected to hate. But multiple identities must inevitably be accepted, and honored. We are not likely to have any nations that are not
pluralistic—especially when so many of the people in them are pluralistic all by themselves. And personal identity-change takes place much more easily when multiple identities are commonplace; you do not have to undergo the stress of complete conversion.

Third, we come to accept the centrality of learning to the life of every individual, to every society, and to the species as a whole. At the individual level learning is best described as growth, at the societal level as progress, at the species level as evolution. Perhaps “discovery” is a better word than “learning” for what I am trying to describe here. Most ideas of learning, as found in traditional societies and doctrinal religions, assume that whatever information one may need, whatever understanding, exists somewhere in the society: the task is to get in front of a good teacher, pay attention, and do your homework.

The kind of learning that becomes a necessity for survival in the postmodern age—the discovery kind of learning—is a bit different. It is not so much the constant filling-in of a picture as an ongoing process of reality-construction in which it frequently becomes necessary to step out of the picture, and sometimes to drop the old picture entirely. Science, if properly understood, is a good model for this kind of learning; not scientism, the worship of facts, but science based on the constant attempt to falsify one’s hypotheses and find better ones. Pragmatism, the philosophical tradition we associate with American philosophers such as William James and John Dewey and (more recently) Richard Rorty, also has much to contribute to how we go about learning and living in the postmodern world. In the pragmatic view, theories become, as James put it, “instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest.” To be a postmodern pragmatist is to recognize all constructs as theories—and hence as instruments to be used where appropriate and periodically replaced.

Fourth, we come to accept morality, and moral discourse, as a living and central element in human existence. We see our interpersonal relationships as collaborative efforts in constructing values. We see education as, among other things, a training in the skills of moral reasoning—morality not merely handed down but learned and created and re-created out of experience. And when there is conflict about that, as there inevitably will be, we accept the conflict also as an arena for expressing and creating values.

The collapse of belief does not, it turns out, result in a collapse of morality: quite the opposite. Many people turn to old belief systems precisely because they come with ready-to-wear values. Other people find their values in the give-and-take of moral reasoning, in secular humanism, in New Age or mystical religions, in political commitments, in philosophy. Plenty of paths, and plenty of people on all of them. New developments in biotechnology and medical science create a demand for professional ethicists in hospitals. New demands for ethics in politics keep governments everywhere in turmoil; politicians are repeatedly surprised to find that what was kept secret and tolerated a few decades ago is now made public and criticized. The early postmodern years are bringing, instead of a collapse of morality, a renaissance of searching for principles of life that we variously call morals, ethics, values. And this is not merely a single shift of values but a continual dynamic process of moral discourse and discovery. Morals are not being handed down from the mountaintop on graven tablets; they are being created by people out of the challenges of the times. The morals of today are not the morals of yesterday, and they will not be the morals of tomorrow.

Fifth, we inhabit all kinds of SCR’s in new ways. A social construction of reality does not have to be discarded the moment one has recognized that that is what it is. The Wizard of Oz, upon being exposed as human, may still be a very good man; and the belief, tradition, value, religion, norm, or Constitution that stands revealed as nothing more than a social construct may still be a very useful item. When you step out of an SCR, identify it as such and perhaps even perceive its limitations, you may very likely step back again. You can step in, in many different ways. Much of the social behavior and the political position-taking of our time can be identified as different ways of stepping in. You can deny that you have ever stepped out and hunker down as a fundamentalist defender of the eternal rightness of your tradition. You can recognize that it is merely a tradition and deliberately take it on anyway—as, for example, some people choose to observe the customs of Orthodox Judaism—and do so quite seriously. You can do the same thing with a giggle, and call it camp. You can lose the faith, as has probably happened to more priests than we will ever know, and continue to preach it because you think it is good for others. You can come to a point in your life when you see the artificial nature of your society’s reality, and continue to live within it anyway simply because it is comfortable to do so.

This is especially important in relation to all the artifacts we call
government—norms and laws, and the philosophical principles and cultural traditions they are derived from. These do not merely evaporate, even if all lawyers were to agree on their artificiality. They remain honorable monuments to prior value-creating efforts, they remain literally true for many people in the society, and they remain highly useful guidelines and foundations for new efforts at creativity.

Whenever people step out of a reality construct and step back into it again, the stepping in involves both choice and creativity. “In the same river we step and we do not step,” wrote Heraclitus. He may have been trying to tell us something about living in social constructions of reality. Every decision to reinhabit a tradition has a bit of the quality of the Scotsmen getting back into their kilts—we have made up something new, even if we don’t want to admit it to ourselves or to others. This seems to be a way that people create reality without taking on the stress of consciously doing so.

As we become more sensitive to these various strategies, we discover that we are living in a much more interesting time than we may have suspected—a time in which there are not only many realities, but many ways of living in and with them—and we may become more skilled at making such choices.

Each of these ways of changing can be found all around us, as the life strategies of people who do not think of themselves as postmoderns. Each relates to the other; they are all part of our growing repertoire of ways to construct and reconstruct reality. If this is postmodernism, let us make the most of it.

HINTS OF A CIVILIZATION: SIX NORMS

As we look around for hopeful signs, signs that the world is making the transition from theater to civilization, we can select many kinds of evidence: the fact that we have gotten this far without a nuclear war, the growing number of international organizations, the modest success of groups such as Amnesty International at reducing the sum total of human barbarity. Here I would like to direct attention to the slow but nonetheless impressive emergence of global norms.

A norm is a pattern of behavior that is somewhere along the road to reification, taking on a certain sanctity—becoming accepted as a way that people ought to behave. Norms govern commerce, play,