

DECONSTRUCTIONISM: THE POSTMODERN CULT OF HERMES

I. Introduction

- A. Deconstructionism (D) is a powerful postmodern movement currently in vogue on major college campuses and among the intellectual elite. Its influence, permeates every area of our culture. This movement has given rise to tribalism, political correctness, re-imaging, multiculturalism, and culture wars. It has become a hammer for smashing traditional values.

- B. The Background of Deconstructionism

In order to properly understand the context of D it is important to follow the development of intellectual thought in Western culture. Two terms are indispensable to understand: modernism and postmodernism. Both are very broad terms.

1. Definition of Modernism: Modernism is another word for Enlightenment humanism. Evangelical thinker, Thomas Oden, says this period began with the fall of the Bastille in 1789 (French Revolution), and ended with the collapse of communism and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. It was a period that affirmed the existence and possibility of knowing truth by human reason alone. Hence in a symbolic act, the goddess of Reason was installed in the Notre Dame cathedral in France--Reason took the place of God; naturalism replaced the supernatural. It instead avowed scientific discovery, human autonomy, linear progress, absolute truth (or the possibility of knowing it), and rational planning of social orders (i.e., socialism). It began with great optimism.

2. Definition of Postmodernism: Postmodernism in many ways is a reaction against modernism that has been brewing since the late 19th Century. In postmodernism the intellect is replaced by will, reason by emotion, and morality by relativism. Reality is nothing more than a social construct; truth equals power. Your identity comes from a group. Postmodernism is characterized by fragmentation, indeterminacy, and a distrust of all universalizing (worldviews) and power structures (the establishment). It is a worldview that denies all worldviews ("stories"). In a nutshell, postmodernism says there are no universal truths valid for all people. Instead, individuals are locked into the limited perspective of their own race, gender or ethnic group. It is Nietzsche in full bloom.

II. Defining Deconstructionism

(Note: Ds would resist all attempts at definition as tyrannical, but they are inconsistent in this since their own books are nothing more than extended definitions of their method. In fact, one might well accuse Ds of only defining!)

- A. D is a way of reading a text. It was originally a method of literary criticism and only applied to literary texts. Now however, Ds say all of life is a text to be interpreted, whether it is a poem, history, family values, a government, religion, science, a corporate charter, or architecture. The emphasis in this form of reading is never to learn the intended meaning of the author, but rather the subjective interpretation of the reader.
- B. *Ds argue that all writing is reducible to an arbitrary sequence of linguistic signs or words whose meanings have no relationship to the author's intention or to the world outside the text. NEWSWEEK, 6/22/81*
- C. *The deconstructive approach to a "text"--which can be a television sitcom or a roadsign as easily as an epic poem--is to dismantle it, paying particular attention to its elitists, anti-feminist or otherwise unchic presuppositions. The enterprise is informed by a philosophy according to which the world is indeterminate until someone--temporarily, and only after a fashion--makes it determinate by using words to describe it. Since words are (allegedly) always shifting their meanings, no interpretation of those words is more correct than any other. The job of criticism is therefore to expose this inherent contradiction in the very idea of the "meaning" or veracity of a text. THE ECONOMIST, May 18, 1991. p.95*

III. The Roots of Deconstructionism--Its Philosophical Foundations

The origin of D arose among some French intellectuals after WWII. The most notable proponent and father of the movement is Jacques Derrida. D, as mentioned earlier, was originally a form of literary criticism, but soon took on much wider implications. It emerged out of a philosophical milieu which included, first and foremost, existentialism (see CIM Briefing paper #50), Romanticism, the philosophy of Kant, the psychoanalysis of Freud, fascism (they would love to deny this), phenomenology, and pragmatism.

IV. The Major Tenets of Deconstructionism

- A. The nature of reality: Objective reality cannot be known. There is no

transcendence. The universe is a closed system. Reality is entirely subjective. A group and its language creates its own reality until it is replaced by the power of another group. (You see the influence of Kant here, i.e., the phenomena of life can never be known as it is, but is always interpreted according to certain innate categories of the knower.)

- B. The possibility of knowledge: Ds are true skeptics. What knowledge we have is not direct but indirect. The world comes to us through language and only through language which is in turn a social construct. A statement is true if it empowers an individual or group. Here we note the influence of pragmatism.
- C. The nature of man: Individual identity is a myth. Man only achieves his identity through his group or culture. The individual when disaffected has the right to create his own meaning. Here Ds differ from the earlier existentialists where the individual is supreme. Ds are similar to fascism in this regard.
- D. Moral decision-making. Ds deeply resent what they call *totalizing*. By this term they are referring to universal values that are true for all cultures and all time. According to Ds, right is what a group decides is right for the moment. Right emerges out of power. According to Ds only the strong survive. Those who can deal with the lack of meaning and can create their own reality against the weight of the entire Western tradition prove their right to exist. Laws and social conventions are only masks for power. Value judgements are power plays.
- E. The nature of language: Language is a system constructed on the foundation of arbitrary symbols. That is, texts are collections of words and pictures (*signifiers*) that have no inherent meaning or connection to the objective world of things or objects (*signified*). Since language is the medium for communication, and since language constructions are unstable, interpretation is also uncertain. Therefore, the emphasis is always on the one receiving the message, i.e., the reader, or the interpreter. And further, since the meaning of words (*signifiers*) is derived from one's social context, ultimate meaning likewise arises from one's social context. Language can only convey cultural biases.

V. The Method of Deconstructionism

- A. Deconstructing a text is similar to dismantling a house to see what mistakes

were made in its building. When a reader deconstructs a text he is examining it for prejudice and bias that the author might have used for purposes of control. For example, a deconstructionist reading of the Declaration of Independence would note that the phrase *all men are created equal* excludes women, and while it talks of freedom, it was written by a white male slave-owner. The rhetoric of liberty is contradicted by sexism and slavery. The Ds look for deception or bad faith which might be consciously or unconsciously (the Freudian element) be motivating a particular author/artist/politician. Note also, that what is absent (gender or ethnic group) from a text may loom large in a deconstructionist interpretation of a text. They refer to this as *the presence of absence*.

Postmodern critic, Thomas Oden notes:

Deconstructionism...[is] always asking the skeptical question about the text, asking what self-deception or bad faith might be unconsciously motivating a particular conceptuality." by Thomas Oden. **TWO WORLDS: NOTES ON THE DEATH OF MODERNITY IN AMERICA AND RUSSIA**, p.79.

- B. The task of D, therefore, is to uncover contradictions, to show the hidden and suppressed meanings that inhere in a text, whether it is a literary work, or a social institution. Since the official meaning of a discourse is determined by those *in power*, Postmodern critics *deconstruct* those meanings to discover what is hidden or suppressed in a text, thereby discrediting the establishment which stands behind the text and gaining the *right* to overthrow its authority.
- C. The ultimate aim of an interpretation is to construct a meaning which accounts for one's own experience or that of a group. For example, a revisionist historian might write a history of Columbus' discovery of the new world which might benefit those who were oppressed by the white Europeans. Just as we have *spin doctors* in politics and the news media, we have *spin scholarship*.

VI. The Influence of Deconstructionism

The influence of D in America is all-pervasive. It can be found in movies, rock videos, history textbooks, political campaigns, theology and religious issues, performance art, TV commercials, ethnic and gender studies, and especially in literary criticism from which it arose. Some current examples:

- A. The recent Disney cartoon *deconstructs* the story of Pocahontas. The artful cartoon feature has her falling in love with the English colonist, John Smith, whom she ultimately converts to Gaia (earth) worship. In actuality, she was never romantically linked to John Smith; she converted to Christianity, married John Wolfe, and lived out her days in England.
- B. Feminist theology. It is an attempt to re-image the salvation story of Christianity in feminist terms. Other attempts at re-imaging are the Black Muslims in their peculiar *deconstruction* of Islam.
- C. Inclusive translations of Scripture and re-writing of old Christian hymns. The original text is *deconstructed* to suit modern ethnic and group sensitivities.
- D. Elementary American history textbooks. In a new American history textbook George Washington is given scarce mention. When the author was asked why the omission on a recent TV news program, he answered: *He was a white, aristocratic slave-owner.*
- E. Science. The influence of deconstructionist thinking in the scientific establishment is causing no small amount of alarm. Ds maintain that scientists are nothing more than the high priesthood of the establishment that produce better technology for oppression. For an excellent study of the influence of D in the field of science see: ***HIGHER SUPERSTITION: THE ACADEMIC LEFT AND ITS QUARRELS WITH SCIENCE***, by Paul R. Gross and Norman Levitt.

VII. A Critique of Deconstructionism

(Note: D may seem easy for us as Christians to refute since it so readily defies logic. This is true, but we must remember that for Ds the issues are primarily emotional. Christians are their worst nightmare because they insist on a transcendent Word and that reality is intelligible!

- A. Ds are relativists, but proclaimed relativists cannot be consistent relativists. If truth does not exist what is to prevent us from deconstructing the Ds? If *nothing is true* as they say it is, why should we believe that proposition? Why should we attach any value to any of their writings? For another example, Ds often rail against the Western canon (great classics), but turn around and establish their own. One professor rejects Shakespeare because he was too heterosexual. Then she

recommends her own selections for students to study!

- B. Moral issues are the Achille's heel of D. At best they can only remain silent. However, they are anything but! They argue loud and long about oppression as though it were a great evil. To say something is right for someone else or some group would be *logocentric* according to their own texts!
- C. The Ds are correct that interpretation is somewhat subjective and limited in determining what is in the mind of an author. Yet while we do not know exhaustively, we can know truly. If we did not, civilization would be impossible.
- D. There is probably no clearer example of solipsism in the history of philosophy. If we read their books seriously (do they want us to?) then communication is impossible. (Solipsism: *the total inability to know outside of one's own mind.*)
- E. The reader becomes the artist. The author/actor no longer has rights to the intended meaning of his work. All creativity comes in the interpretation of a text.
- F. Ds rightly reject reason alone as an absolute in modernist thinking. However, reason is part and parcel of the IMAGO DEI. The only consistent way to dispense the law of noncontradiction is to abolish all speech and attempts at communication which the Ds not do. The fact is they write scores of books and are incessant talkers (circumloquacious). It is almost as if speech (for those who would denigrate language) for Ds is a way of self-affirmation, i.e., "I talk, (or write) therefore, I exist."
- G. Ds are consumed by animosity toward those who are logocentric--modernists and particularly Christians. They believe the latter are the cause of all prejudice and oppression that exists in the world.

VIII. Conclusion

Christianity believes the Logos is transcendent to the world, but not immanent; the Logos is not subordinate, but equal with God; personal, not impersonal; reflected in all creation, especially in humanity. Absolutes exist because of the revealed Word. See John 1:1-12.

The author must die so the reader may live. Deconstructionist quote of unknown source

...*(T)he unbeliever's war with the Word (that is to say, their war with Scripture and Christ) will lead them to be at war with the word--all human language and meaning. Because they reject the transcendent Word of God, Jesus, who is the very Truth of God, they are led in the immanent domain to reject the idea of the word, meaning and logic as well.* Gregory L. Bahnsen (1948-1995).

For Further Study

Carson, D.A. and Woodbridge, John D. ***GOD AND CULTURE***. See Chapters 1 and 2.

Culler, Jonathan. ***ON DECONSTRUCTION***.

Ellis, John M. ***AGAINST DECONSTRUCTIONISM***.

Lehman, David. ***SIGNS OF THE TIMES: DECONSTRUCTION AND THE FALL OF PAUL DE MANN***.

D'Souza, Dinesh. ***ILLIBERAL EDUCATION: THE POLITICS OF RACE AND SEX ON CAMPUS***. See Chapter 6.

Lundin, Roger. ***THE CULTURE OF INTERPRETATION: CHRISTIAN FAITH IN A POSTMODERN WORLD***.

Phillips, Timothy R. and Okholm, Dennis L. ed. ***CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS IN THE POST MODERN WORLD***.

Thiselton, Anthony C. ***NEW HORIZONS IN HERMENEUTICS***.

Veith, Gene Edward, Jr. ***MODERN FASCISM: LIQUIDATING THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW***. See pp. 135-144.

Veith, Gene Edward, Jr. ***POSTMODERN TIMES: A CHRISTIAN GUIDE TO CONTEMPORARY THOUGHT AND CULTURE***.

Walhout, Clarence, and Ryken, Leland. ed. ***CONTEMPORARY LITERARY THEORY: A CHRISTIAN APPRAISAL***.