

There is a growing and pervasive sense in South Africa that no one has any easy answers any more. Post-modernism offers a way out of the impasse – and a new mode of political action.

By HELEN MOFFETT

The politics of affinity



LEFTIST RHETORIC: Creating a groundswell of grassroots disillusion.

Southlight

POST-MODERNISM is one of the few trendy terms in current use beginning with the prefix "post" that I actually find useful.

Post-structuralism incorporates a wide range of subversive and erudite academic theories, but ultimately (and deliberately) defies definition, which doesn't make it all that useful to Joe or Josephine Average.

And hearing the word post-feminism bandied about makes my blood boil, especially when it is blithely used by women's magazine editors about a country which has the worst known rape statistics in the world, and on a continent in which women grow 90 percent of all food while owning less than one percent of the land. (I didn't hear anyone talking about "the post-democratic South Africa" simply because the ANC had been unbanned.)

Post-colonialism presents less of a problem – apart from my suspicion that most colonialisms are not yet quite "post".

Nevertheless, it can be quite a quest to grasp a sense of what post-modernism means, especially in terms of political implications. The literal translation – "after modernism" – doesn't help much, and some of its more impressive exponents have produced somewhat conflicting definitions.

The respected black Marxist, Frederic Jameson, calls post-modernism "the cultural logic of late capitalism". Others, however, explain that it is the inevitable intellectual fall-out resulting from the final demise of Marxism. The extraordinary thing about post-modernism is that it would have no qualms about maintaining that it was both – and more besides.

Much more a practice or an attitude than a rigid set of paradigms, it acknowledges the crazy patchwork of late-twentieth century cultures and ideologies and draws its own identity and policy from this very multiplicity. We live in a world where, increasingly,

boundaries dissolve, theories change (often dramatically), ideologies lose credibility, and identities become increasingly hybrid and fluid.

Politically, post-modernism involves working with this view of the world as a *modus operandi*, rather than choosing and clinging to one particular unified system of belief, politics or ideology that claims to "make sense of it all".

Andrew Ross queries whether post-modernism in fact could mean "universal abandon", while Jane Flax sees its as a way of "thinking fragments". What it boils down to is practising a form of social criticism – of cultural, ethical and political systems – without subscribing to any particular philosophy, rather drawing selectively from what is current and appropriate. (This is where the sense of enablement comes from: one chooses one's strategies, instead of having them chosen for you.) Oppressions can thus be converted (subverted?) into sources of strength.

How does any of this apply to our current situation? In a recently published speech on the future of liberalism, Van Zyl Slabbert

pointed to the failure of what he called redemptive ideologies, both in South Africa and abroad. This obviously comes in the wake of the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, and the inevitable rumbles of disquiet among home-front Marxists, as well as the South African government's long-overdue revelation that apartheid was not going to lead to a land of milk and honey with everyone happily developing separately.

Another factor is the groundswell of grassroots disillusion with the rhetoric heard from the left for so long. There is a growing and pervasive sense in South Africa that no one has any easy answers any more.

Historically, anti-apartheid activists have worked on a system of unitarian but polarised politics: Us versus Them, and if someone wasn't For Us, they were Against Us. The liberalism that Slabbert speaks of looks too much like an uneasy perch between two unstable and discredited polar opposites – the extreme right and the radical left.

Does post-modernism offer anything different, or is it the same old liberal individu-

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alism tricked out in new garb?

It does offer an "ideology" (or non-ideology, rather) that is frankly pragmatic and non-partisan, which works on the basis of



LIBERAL STALWART HELEN SUZMAN:
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what Donna Haraway calls affinity, rather than allegiance. It avoids the rhetoric, the loyalty of ideological commitment – "my country/party/leader, right or wrong".

In the sombre days of activism '70s and '80s style, there was something of this magic affinity in struggle politics. I remember a 1987 UDF calendar which featured a bright cartoon of a mass rally, attended by every spectrum of society: ANC cadres in khaki camouflage busing in from the townships and Black Sash ladies in pearls and print dresses, Irish nuns and dreadlocked Rastafarians, Muslims in Arafat scarves and Jews wearing yarmulkas.

In this recent past, that kind of mobilisation took place in the face of a common enemy; there was barely time or energy to address the issues of the differences behind what was after all a front that was very nec-

essarily both united and democratic.

Post-modernism operates from the point of recognising those very differences, rather than contesting them, and yet demonstrates a capacity for remaining radical in social and

political practice. The crisis around AIDS has been a good example of how very different (and even historically opposed) pressure groups or constituencies can mobilise around a common issue without necessarily being committed to the same ideological principles.

In the United States, this has led to impressive coalitions between wealthy white gay men, black single parents on welfare, drug users, medical personnel, prostitutes, women in violent relationships, rape survivors, haemophiliacs and others who have been either scapegoated where the disease is concerned, or who are authentically vulnerable (through poverty, poor health and education infrastructure, cultures of macho behaviour) but largely sidestepped.

Post-modern tactics thus make for strange – but often refreshing – compatriots. Instead of operating out of loyalty to a system or group identity,

one operates out of a sense of urgency around a specific issue. Thus the issues, not the organisation/ideology/creed/community, become the stimulus for action.

South Africans have been very good at operating this way in the past, and while I don't pretend to have any quick solutions to the complex patterns of violence tearing our country apart, it seems that some kind of return to this method of mobilisation is needed – without placing our hope in dogmas and doctrines, utopias and volkstaats, comrades and capitalists, total strategies and total onslaughts.

According to Cornell West, director of the Afro-American Studies Programme at Princeton University, dogmatism and despair are the two greatest internal enemies bedevilling activist politics and oppressed communities. These sometimes arise from

the very ideologies that fuel liberation struggles, and are best overcome by the creativity and flexibility that post-modernist practitioners advocate. (My personal impression is that the latter have elevated optimistic cynicism to an art form!)

This is not to imply that post-modernism is perfect, or should be seen as a Messianic bearer of all truths and righter of all wrongs. It can be associated with political expediency, or a tendency to blur the urgency of some claims upon justice, by insisting that we are all equally different.

Sometimes the post-modern view looks a little like a Benetton advert: a line of funky but definitely middle-class people, one each of every colour of the rainbow. Diversity is not that simple, and certain issues must be prioritised.

There is still definitely a case for the "standpoint" view of political involvement, which privileges the viewpoint of the person or community which directly experiences discrimination. There are also a number of thinkers who remain committed Marxists, feminists, Muslims, Jews, and so forth, but nevertheless identify themselves with post-modernism.

Feminism has in fact been called "the political conscience of post-modernism" and feminist scholarship has been responsible for some of the more searching critiques of

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the post-modern mindset. This has led to a lively symbiosis: ideologues benefit from the doctrinal relaxation of post-modernism, and postmodernists benefit from the rigour and structure of the ideologically committed.

All in all, post-modernism seems to be a house that's big enough for everyone to live in.

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