
Two Responses to David Lyon

Gregory Baum & Eric Beresford

Gregory Baum is Emeritus Professor of Theological Ethics and Sociology of Religion and Eric Beresford is Assistant Professor of Religious Ethics, both in the Faculty of Religious Studies at McGill University.

I. Gregory Baum

Listening to and reading David Lyon's three lectures gave me great pleasure. Lyon has the literary ability to present abstract analyses in lively and elegant fashion, drawing examples from the daily experiences of people in contemporary society. He offers persuasive arguments which everyone can follow. Professor Lyon is a scholar who is at home in the sociological tradition, even if he makes occasional excursions in the field of philosophy. Because of this complexity, I wish to sort out the arguments he offers and clarify his line of thought. I realize that there are many ways of reading a text and that my own reading is inevitably partial, yet since I share David Lyon's sociological orientation (and am as unaccustomed to philosophy as he is), I think that my interpretation will be fair.

Since the first two sections, "Liturgy and Cyberspace" and "Customized Religion," are situated for the most part in the field of sociology, I shall deal with them first. By contrast, the third section, "Highways in the Desert," refers to contemporary philosophers who present their ideas as postmodern. I shall examine how this section is related to the preceding ones.

A Radical Critique of Contemporary Modernity

Professor Lyon's analysis of contemporary society is, in my opinion, an original and brilliant updating of the critique of modernity, found within the classical sociological tradition. From the very beginning, the classical sociologists argued against liberal thinkers who praised the achievements

of industrial capitalism and bourgeois democracy and interpreted modernity as the final rung on the ladder of progress. I wish to refer to some of these sociologists to suggest how closely related Lyon's critique of modernity is to theirs.

The young Karl Marx denounced already in the 1840s the dehumanizing cultural impact of the free and unrestrained market system. He believed capitalism would generate "commodity fetishism," that is, the compulsive, quasi-religious thrust to commodify the world. While he was mainly concerned with the human impact of capitalist *production* and hence with workers turned into commodities, he already predicted that capitalist *consumption* would undermine traditional values, corrupt the classical virtues, and commodify humanity's cultural heritage. The only value that would remain, he lamented, was the cash-value.

But Marx still believed in the liberating power of science. The problematic cultural impact of science and technology, or better the domination of instrumental rationality, was analyzed in the 1880s by Ferdinand Tönnies in his *Community and Society*. This classic work compared pre-modern and modern society, recorded people's increasing detachment from their cultural and communitarian roots, and documented the rapid spread of individualism, utilitarianism, and secularism in the age of scientific reason. David Lyon's own contrast between liturgy and cyberspace is an inventive, imaginative application of Tönnies' sociological method. After Tönnies, the cultural domination of scientific rationality was examined and criticized by many sociologists at the turn of the century, in particular by Max Weber.

In the 1920s Georg Lukács, influenced by Max Weber, tried to integrate the critique of scientific positivism (i.e., the domination of scientific rationality) into a revised Marxism, an intellectual effort for which he was kicked out of the Communist Party. Since, according to Lukács, the unrestrained, competitive market system "reified" the workers (transforming workers into "objects") and scientific positivism "reified" the living world (making it a thing, an object, to be controlled and manipulated), there was a tragic affinity between capitalist production and the reign of instrumental reason. Both were reifying, controlling, manipulating forces. Again, David Lyon updates this idea in brilliant fashion, taking into account the globalization of the economy and cybernetic communication technology. He also recognizes an affinity between the commodification of everyday life and the virtual reality created by cyberspace technology.

I could continue the list of thinkers belonging to the critical sociological tradition, whose work is echoed in Professor Lyon's lectures. This does not make his analysis less original! On the contrary, to be rooted in

an intellectual tradition enables thinkers to approach the topic under investigation with a wealth of critical ideas that have a certain internal coherence and have stood the test of time. I am looking forward to reading Professor Lyon's books on the sociology of contemporary technology. If they live up to his Birks Lectures, they are likely to be scholarly gems which do for the 1990s what *Community and Society* did for the decades after 1880.

The danger of these critical analyses is that they may lead to scientific determinism. They may suggest that since humans are so profoundly shaped by the economic and technological structures in which they live, they have ceased to be free agents altogether. Classical sociology has resisted this temptation. What these sociologists discover in society are not 'laws' (comparable to the 'laws' scientists discover in nature) but only 'trends', i.e. cultural currents that have great power but can be resisted. Trends do not impose necessity. Since humans remain free agents, the dominant trends may even summon forth counter-movements of various kinds.

There are positivistic sociologists—they may well be in the majority today—who align themselves with natural scientists and thus believe they can discover 'laws' operative in society. They therefore uphold a social determinism and think they can make scientific predictions of future developments. Even careful readers of classical sociology can fall into the deterministic trap. For instance, the French theologian Jacques Ellul drew from Max Weber's sociology a critical analysis of technological society which he, Ellul, (mis)understood in a deterministic way. David Lyon protects himself against such a misunderstanding by referring to existing counter-movements in society, even if he does not pay detailed attention to them.

Lyon tends to be skeptical of counter-cultural trends. Why? Because in a society made up of inevitably frustrated individuals, he argues, counter-cultural trends "sell well": they become commodities and enrich their promoters. Lyon follows the suspicion of Herbert Marcuse, in *One-Dimensional Man*, that every utterance critical of present-day capitalism is immediately recuperated as support for that very system. Lyon even offers examples of spirituality as commodity: today, large corporations dissatisfied with the performance of their employees invite teachers of spirituality to help the staff overcome their personal frustrations, acquire peace of mind, and become more efficient in their work. This Marcusean suspicion makes Lyon cautious even in regard to projects of church renewal. He fears that in the long run these renewals serve to assimilate the church to the modern world. My own perspective is more hopeful.

What counter-trends (apart from fidelity to Jesus) does Professor

Lyon mention in his first two sections? Is the postmodern such a counter-trend? Not according to the first two sections! They, in line with classical sociology, offer a systematic critique of the contemporary phase of modernity, and when they use the term 'postmodern' they refer to aspects of contemporary modernity that differ from the characteristics of modernity's earlier phases. In the first two sections, 'postmodern' simply refers to the dominant trend of contemporary modernity and *not* to any counter-trend reacting against it. What David Lyon may want to suggest is that the attitudes and approaches grandly proclaimed by philosophers as postmodern, are in fact the highly problematic products of contemporary modernity.

Yet allow me to return to the question of what counter-trends David Lyon mentions in his first two sections. He recognizes that uprooting persons from culture and community need not necessarily produce the 'plastic self' shaped and re-shaped by different institutional contexts. The detachment from tradition may also facilitate the emergence of the 'expressive self', the self in search of authenticity, seeking fidelity to its deepest longing. Here Lyon sees a sign of hope! This quest could be the starting point for an ethically-based counter-trend against contemporary modernity. Lyon concedes that the 'expressive revolutions' of the 1960s abandoned the norms of tradition and modernity, not in a nihilistic manner, but in search of personal development, ecological care and new human relations. He hints at the therapeutic movement, the ecological movement and the women's movement. Yet he refuses to analyze these or other counter-movements because he sees them as fragile social phenomena, threatened by commodification and nihilistic deconstruction and exposed to the assimilating power of the unregulated global market economy and the computerized communication technology.

When, after painting this dark picture, Lyon does look for signs of hope that the world can still be healed, he turns to Jesus and his message of salvation, which promise to rescue us from self-destruction and to empower us to resist contemporary modernity's cultural impact. According to Lyon's conservative theology, Jesus acts in human history only through the community of believers. He has little sympathy for a theology of the cosmic Christ who through the Spirit acts in human history as rescuer and reconciler.

Confronting Cultural Pluralism

The first two sections could be interpreted as the proposal that the 'post-modern' is simply the tragic product of modernity. In other words, the relativism of truth and values, the disappearance of the responsible self, the collapse of any master story or ethical foundation that could unite

the human family, and the power of virtual reality and hence the inability to distinguish between fact and fiction, are simply the long-range results of capitalist and technological modernity. Here the modern ushers in its own destruction. Scientific rationality deconstructs itself and calls for the irrational. Such a thesis might fit into the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School which proposed already in the 1920s that the rational Enlightenment had become its own greatest enemy and that instrumental reason, as the only surviving form of reason, stood in the way of human emancipation.

Yet when we come to Lyon's third section, "Highways in the Desert," this proposal, tempting though it may be, breaks down. By turning to three philosophical defenders of the postmodern, Baudrillard, Vattimo, and Bauman, Lyon opens himself to historical evidence he had previously disregarded. It would still be possible to situate the work of Jean Baudrillard in the conceptual framework of the first two sections, for the French philosopher delights or seems to delight in the radical pluralism created by commodification, the relativism generated by the breakdown of common norms, and the virtual reality and the disappearance of history produced by contemporary communication technology. Lyon admits that Baudrillard may offer his ideas tongue-in-cheek. Yet when Lyon turns to Vattimo and Bauman he confronts new evidence.

The pluralism of which these two thinkers speak is not the 'empty pluralism' produced by the collapse of common norms and the availability of multiple choice but the 'rich pluralism' created by the many religious and cultural traditions that meet and possibly compete with one another in today's world. This interreligious and intercultural encounter raises new questions regarding modernity.

What is being questioned here are claims to universality made in western history because they have all been used as ideologies of universal control. The West sees itself as the focal point and forward thrust of human history and sees other religions and cultures situated on the side lines, destined eventually to learn from the West. As we approach the third millennium, we realize that the very terminology, counting the time in "years of the Lord," colonizes the cultures not founded on or influenced by Christianity. We have good reason to become suspicious of all universal claims as conscious or unconscious forms of domination: the biblical Almighty ruling over the world; the name of Jesus apart from which there is no salvation; classical metaphysical reason of antiquity and modern scientific reason, both of which claim to be universally valid. Here we have genuine reactions to modernity and creative critiques of metaphysics and scientific reason that are not derived from the commodification of everyday life and the cybernetics of communications technology, examined in

Lyon's first two sections. The third section establishes that the 'postmodern' is not simply the product of late modernity but also an original reaction to modernity. This is a topic worth exploring.

Relativizing our own culture, recognizing the perspectival nature of truth, marvelling at the goodness of other religions and rejoicing in the world's rich cultural pluralism are issues that deserve the greatest attention. David Lyon only touches upon these matters, but what he does say about Vattimo and Bauman, authors whom I alas do not know, is so interesting that I am eager to read and study them. Despite his rather conservative Christian theology, Lyon reveals an admirable openness in regard to the rich pluralistic encounter of postmodernity. He recognizes that the crisis over truth and the confusion of values may not be a catastrophe but an occasion for creativity. He suggests that *altérité*, the turning to the other, the recognition of the claim which the other, especially the beaten and wounded other, makes upon the Good Samaritan, may still initiate a human dynamic that leads to justice, peace and reconciliation and inspire a new, more valid reading of Scripture and Christian doctrine, revealing an as yet unexpected meaning of God's promises.

II. Eric Beresford

Attempts to engage important philosophical problems critically from the perspective of Christian faith have a long history. Clearly, some styles of philosophical questioning are more amenable to theological appropriation than others. The relatively limited engagement of so called postmodern thinkers by more conservative theologians may simply be symptomatic of the two solitudes from which they operate, the rift between "continental" and "Anglo-American" philosophy. More likely, it reflects the real risks involved in any attempt to engage the practices of the philosophical descendants of Nietzsche.

In his 1994 Birks Lectures, Dr. David Lyon accepts that risk and offers a stylish attempt to delineate an urbane, if essentially conservative, restatement of orthodox Christian theology in the light of our contemporary social and intellectual context. He claims that this task is important because the postmodern is no longer the preserve of a few intellectuals. Rather, our culture is undergoing a number of important shifts whose collective effect is captured by the use of the term 'postmodern'. Postmodernity, as Dr. Lyon understands it, is significant both as a challenge to the possibility of Christian orthodoxy, and as opening up a new space for Christian discourse(s) in the wake of the collapse of the intellectual and cultural consensus that characterized modernity. That David Lyon does

not weep for this collapse is surely motivated, in part, by this new apologetic opportunity, and not simply by his distaste for the hubris of the modern project. However, I fear that his apologetic concerns lead him to an incomplete characterization of postmodernity that sees neither its ethical seriousness nor its risks for the sort of Christian apologetic he wishes to undertake. Indeed, I shall suggest that Lyon's postmodernity turns out to be better described as late-modernity. Both the consequences that Lyon draws from the groundless play of postmodern discourse, and the alternative grounding he proposes, move within the alternatives posited, not by the postmodern, but by the project of modernity itself.

Lyon's characterization of the postmodern takes us to the heart of the problem. Early on in the first section Lyon characterizes the postmodern as a fundamental questioning of the, "whole massive project that made the modern world—from science and technology to liberal democracy" (8). Whilst the future of this radical questioning remains in doubt, its current social manifestations can be seen in the rise of consumerism and in the new information and communication technologies. But are these social phenomena really signs of the postmodern?

The link between consumerism and the postmodern has been widely noted. The postmodern self is a self devoid of metaphysical foundation. There is no essential self, only the self constructed out of the groundless free choices of the agent who thereby constructs herself. Consumerism is a social manifestation of this self construction. The consumer is a "bundle of desires" (16) involved in a project of creating her own identity through the array of products and services whose consumption defines her as the person she is. The consumer's choices cannot be placed within an overarching explanatory framework that orders her choices into a purposive whole. Neither Providence nor progress is available any longer to provide such frameworks, only the exuberant anarchy of consumption which must finally be as inconsequential as it is individual. Even the interests and desires of the self cannot be appealed to consistently. There is no self prior to self construction. Since even the self cannot be posited as a foundation giving meaning and purpose to the choices of the consumer, consumerism becomes an expression of the essentially nihilistic cast of postmodernity. Where modernity displaced God as the transcendent ground of meaning and sought to ground the realms of meaning and value in the human, postmodernity gives up the quest for adequate grounds altogether. Consumption, like the postmodern self, is detached from the promise of rational progress and becomes a context in which the only transcendent value is choice itself.

The second social manifestation of the postmodern is located in the

new information technologies. Like the phenomenon of consumerism, these technologies give social expression to an anarchic, normless and individualized relationship to the world. This is most clearly seen in Lyon's account of cyberspace. Cyberspace is used to describe, "a world mediated by computer networks." Two characteristics of this world are emphasized. First there is an "anything goes" mentality in which there are no principles, precedents or priorities (11), in which reality is fragmented into a series of electronically mediated "virtual realities." Related to this fragmentation of reality is the shift from presence to absence. Lyon implies that there is a direct link between the interruption of face-to-face bodily relationships and the disintegration of reality. The link being drawn here is reflected in Lyon's hesitancy with regard to the phenomenon of mediation. Relationships with others and with the world around us are increasingly technologically mediated with a consequent loss of intimacy. Those with whom we communicate are absent, and as a result there is a breakdown of the interactions with others necessary to sustain community. We become a "society of strangers," and this will affect how we treat each other (30). What is more, this loss of presence robs us of the contexts that limit the malleability of words. In cyberspace where flesh becomes word, words become shifting signs pointing only to themselves.

Lyon's account of our situation reads as a classic narrative of decline. Hubristic modernism has collapsed into nihilistic postmodernism, and it has done so, at least partly, as a result of its own inner contradictions. Of course he recognizes that as a simple historical account this is inadequate. Elements of the postmodern, particularly its nihilism, appear much earlier and he suggests that it is better to see modernity and postmodernity as "competing world-views" rather than the "supersession of one view by another" (9). His account is to be seen as genetic, not historical. Further, the postmodern is itself unstable. Despite postmodern reservations about a unitary self underlying our choices, the postmodern self is entangled in quests for authenticity whose roots lie in what might be called the "expressive self" (21). Fragmentation, individualization, and "exuberant anarchy" are too inconsequential to be sustained. If the modern self cannot be adequately grounded nor the postmodern self-sustained, then the space is opened for a new apologetic. The new Babel, the postmodern, is to be welcomed, but this affirmation is not final. Lyon denies the suggestion that we should equate the collapse of the totalizing strategies of modernism with the emancipation of voices previously suppressed. Rather, the endless now of the postmodern is to be rejected as a dangerous fragmentation inadequate to human moral purpose and destructive of the aspirations of those most damaged by our current

social arrangements. The path which Lyon takes is not Baudrillard's post-modern travelogue, but Isaiah's revelation of the moral God whose purposes we are called to fulfill. Let me say that I am very sympathetic to some of his anxieties, but are Baudrillard and Isaiah the only real alternatives? Are they even alternatives at all in anything like Lyon's sense? Is Lyon's narrative of decline, whether read genetically or historically, not dependent on the possibility of the sort of totalizing perspective which modernity fails to ground? Does Lyon not have to posit a ground upon which he stands, outside both modernity and postmodernity, from which he surveys the inevitable collapse of one "world-view" to another; a ground from which he can see both "world-views" as competing wholes?

In Lyon's account of the self we are faced with a stark choice between wholism and disintegration. Either the self can be grounded in some metanarrative that orders its choices and shapes its life, or the choices are essentially arbitrary and anything goes. But this is not self-evidently true. There are pragmatists as well as postmoderns who would suggest that, even in the absence of foundations, our experience of finding ourselves in particular social and historical contexts, and as part of particular moral communities, means that our choices are not so much arbitrary as inescapable (Stout 1988, 120). Further, what gives Lyon's account cogency is the totalizing impulse of the either/or with which he presents us. If there is no self beyond the roles and masks that I assume, then arbitrariness and disintegration are inevitable and we had better seek a unity more adequate and self-transparent than that proffered by various versions of the modern self. But again, this is so only if we presuppose that the masks the postmodern self assumes represent relatively complete, self-enclosed worlds that compete with each other against the background of a prior self by whom the various masks are assumed. But what access could we have to a self not already mediated by these masks? What if, following Hegel, we reject this self-coincidence on every level and insist that there is no self to which we have unmediated access? Then there can be no possibility of escaping the limits of contingency, multiplicity, and context (Kolb 1986).

Even Lyon's theological escape route must be mediated. Lyon readily concedes that theology must reflect on the social and cultural contexts of faith. But if our knowledge of God is mediated through particular human contexts, which it surely must be, it cannot function as the transcendent grounding for a vision of moral and social order that comes to us from beyond. It may be true that we cannot resist the sorts of attempts at totalization we see reflected in Lyon's discussion of the expressive self, but this does not mean that we *achieve* totality. Indeed, Kolb has persuasively argued that all such attempts inevitably perpetuate the multiplicity they

seek to avoid. It may be true that “Only a God can save us,” but in the absence, or at best ambiguous presence, of this God we must look to human, and therefore partial, mediations of this divine promise. (I am of course alluding to the [in]famous comment in Heidegger’s interview with *Der Spiegel*. However, my concern is not with Heidegger but with Lyon’s attempt to ground a particular resolution of the postmodern Babel in divine revelation.) Multiplicity may not be the final word, but it is surely an inescapable characteristic of any human word. By refusing this multiplicity and the implied groundlessness of all human perspectives, Lyon locates himself within precisely the same totalizing impulse that he has earlier identified with modernity and criticized as hubris.

Given this, it is unclear to me how Christian truth can cease to be one amongst many without abandoning the social and historical, and as such partial and fragmentary, mediations of Christian truth. In my view Lyon is right to criticize Vattimo for not paying sufficient attention to questions of who controls the airwaves, and who has access to the information highway through which the possibilities opened by postmodernity are mediated. But must we not also ask who controls the authority structures by which religious truth is mediated and liturgical communities are shaped? “The here-and-now search for *shalom*” is “risky” (34); we might add fragile, partial, and incomplete, and these are the very reasons why such religious truth cannot serve as a foundation or goal that will lift us outside and beyond the postmodern. The difficulty with Lyon’s project is that it embodies precisely those peculiarly modern anxieties about sufficient grounds that give rise to the drive towards totalizing explanations which Lyon criticizes as hubris. Lyon would have us avoid nihilism, but perhaps, after all, nihilism is not the result of the rejection of ultimate grounds and the embrace of multiplicity, but rather an inevitable consequence of a failure to take seriously and accept the limits inscribed in the finitude of human rationality and the perspectival context of all human knowing.

Works Cited

- Kolb, David. 1986. *Critique of pure modernity: Hegel, Heidegger and after*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Stout, Jeffrey. 1988. *Ethics after Babel: The languages of morals and their discontents*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.