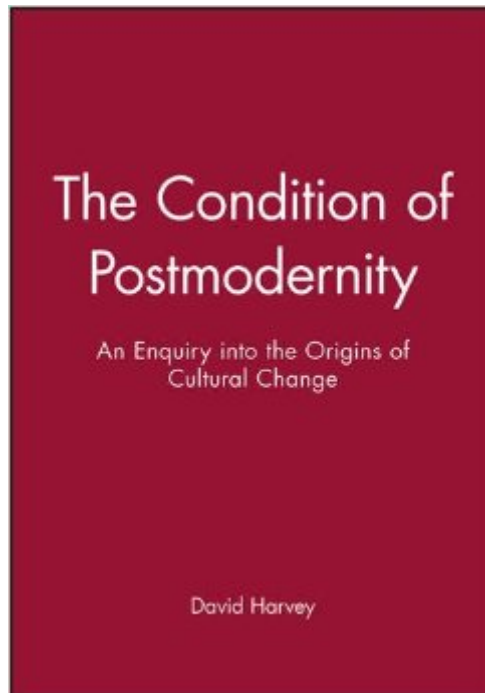


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The Condition Of Postmodernity: An Enquiry Into The Origins Of Cultural Change



Synopsis

In this new book, David Harvey seeks to determine what is meant by the term in its different contexts and to identify how accurate and useful it is as a description of contemporary experience.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Recent history, economics, architecture, business, sociology, marxist critique, and urban *design* are presented as a unified, interdisciplinary study of culture and the state of knowledge today. The density of the text is excused by his convincing overview of knowledge and appropriate references to other 19th and 20th century thinkers. Harvey maps our culture and how we think about ourselves and our world from the enlightenment to the 90's. He is careful and backs his arguments very well, which, I imagine, takes incredible discipline considering the mish-mash of post-modernity. If you have some time, are looking for a challenge, and want a comprehensive and convincing crash course on the state of everything, read this book. It is essential for anyone who has studied several social disciplines and wants to understand them collectively. It will certainly affect any thinking person's perception of the late 20th century and the events that led to it.

This is a great overview of concepts that are, by definition, very fractured. Harvey clarifies and pulls together a number of seemingly disparate elements in a masterful manner. Though this book could work as a good introduction to these concepts, I think readers with some background in the major writers of modernism and postmodernism will get more out of it. Dogmatic postmodernists may be put off that Harvey has the "temerity" to suggest that postmodernism might be an extension of

modernism or that he finds some good in modernism and some excesses in postmodern approaches but, they should get over themselves and realize that their insistence that "all meta-narratives are bad" is their own meta-narrative. Overall, Harvey manages to convincingly express his ideas while maintaining a remarkably evenhanded approach. I especially enjoy the fact that he avoids the postmodernist tendency to ignore the complexities of modernism and, thus create a postmodern meta-narrative about the modernist project.

I am a graduate student and use this book in a course I teach on postmodernism. I think it is the most convincing analysis of postmodernism available. The book is involved and complex, ranging widely over many areas of culture, but Harvey is a clear writer and a lucid thinker. He defines his terms with precision and the work is relatively free of unnecessary jargon -- a rarity in debates over postmodernism. But be forewarned: Harvey himself is no "postmodernist," and is often (though not always) critical of postmodern culture. The point of Harvey's book is to understand what postmodernism is and why it came about, and to answer these questions he relies heavily on economic and sociological models of social change. In this sense at least, Harvey's methodology is significantly removed from that of the thinkers he discusses.

Ask ten academics about what to call our present fin-de-siecle epoch and you'll get ten different labels, but "postmodernism" seems always the default term. Although it's twelve years old, Harvey's book is the best I've read about the pluralistic fabric we daily inhabit. It's edifyingly reader-friendly (especially compared to some of the Franco-drunk rhetoricians out there trying to get a handle on our current world). In precise prose Harvey outlines the shift to our information-as-capital paradigm since the mid-sixties, and the causes of the growth of the temp sector and "just-in-time" production capabilities. Harvey traces the arrival of "flexible accumulation" to the collapse of Fordist production practices in the 1966-73 waves of recession, but covers far more than just economic factors--architecture, art, literature, cinema--without any self-conscious Neo-Marxist whistling-in-the-dark. In his project to articulate a new (meta?) narrative, Harvey's book will probably give post-structuralists a new constellation of ideas to obfuscate with hip terminology and dense prose...Manuel Castell's "The Rise of the Network Society" is another good book along these lines.

Chapters 8-11 of this book, on the rise of finance capital, increasing speculation, and credit, really illuminate the long-term origins of the current crisis. Harvey wrote on p. 357, in 1990 (commenting on the October 1987 crash and its aftermath) that "The mirrors of accelerating

indebtedness...continue to work overtime....Fictitious capital is even more hegemonic than before in its influence....Debts get re-scheduled and rolled over at ever faster rates, with the aggregate effect of re-scheduling the crisis-tendencies of capitalism into the twenty-first century."Harvey is able to make a very compelling case for the analytic power of Marx's Capital--understood as a starting point, not dogmatically -- and dialectical materialism more generally -- as a basis to understand economic and cultural transformation. Rereading the book eleven years after I first read it, I am still struck by his insights, and will no doubt read it again in decades to come.

The Condition of Postmodernity, although suffering from the author's modernist attitude, provides a vital and continually influential work on the perceived shift towards a postmodern cultural epoch. This shift is equated with the economic change from Fordist to Post-Fordist economies and the new regime of flexible accumulation. The book draws on theoretical examples as diverse as the work of Michel Foucault and Karl Marx and brings together empirical examples that are equally wide ranging. It has to be said that although Harvey provides a substantial appraisal and critique of the postmodern condition the meta-narrative employed leaves the author as the outsider looking in rather than the insider looking out.

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