

Editorial

Science and Postmodernism – Further Reflections

Two of the articles in this Issue concern postmodernism. As a phenomenon, postmodernism is hard to pin down. In *Postmodernism and Its Critics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) John McGowan identified four variants of postmodernism as an ‘intellectual discourse’: post-structuralism, a new Marxism, neo-pragmatism and feminism. A number of other variants could be added to the list, and postmodernism can look quite different depending on which variant is the focus of attention. What is clear is that during the 1980s the intellectual climate changed in many university departments. Arthur Marwick summed this up in a tongue-in-cheek way in the *Times Literary Supplement* (‘All quiet on the postmodern front’, Feb. 23rd, 2001). He wrote, ‘[Postmodernists] overran much of Eng Lit and established the puppet state of Cultural Studies. They walked, without even token resistance, into History and Philosophy of Science, being embraced by weeping Sociologists; flamboyant hopes of conquering the high peaks and cantons of the Natural Sciences were, however, exposed as ill-conceived. Parts of the marcher lands of History fell easily, though it was here that some of the nastiest fighting took place.’

In his article Marwick argues that postmodernism is in rapid retreat in the History departments. He sees three aspects of historical studies as having been uncongenial to postmodernism: first, the fact that historians study ‘events’ which are parts of ‘complex chains of causation’. He seems to imply that there is a ‘givenness’ here that cannot be dissolved by the solvent of ‘social construction’ and be made amenable to more-or-less arbitrary interpretation under the rubric that truth is all a matter of perspective, and therefore relative. Second, historians recognise a place in these events for ‘willed human action’. Individuals are not submerged in, and totally determined by, their culture. Third, there is the development of ‘genuine transnational approaches to the analysis of events’, which runs counter to the postmodern assertion that there can only be ‘local’ stories and no ‘metanarratives’. There are interesting parallels here with a critical-realist understanding of the scientific enterprise.

In a previous Editorial (Vol. 12.1) I wrote: ‘I wonder how postmodern our culture is?’ I still wonder about this. The growth of postmodernism as an intellectual fashion has clearly left its mark on popular culture. It is too early to say what effect, if any, its retreat in the Humanities and its failure to ‘conquer the...Natural Sciences’ will have on popular culture. Meanwhile the scientific community is right to be sceptical of an intellectual movement that tends to subvert its *raison d’être*. Therefore critical analyses of the interactions between science and postmodern thought remain important, as the present Issue illustrates. Nevertheless, Christians would be wise not to invest too much apologetic effort on the postmodern front at the expense of neglecting other interactions with secular culture that may prove more significant in the longer term.