

A Marxist Critique of Postmodernism: Theoretical Foundations and the Callinicos Framework

Published: January 29, 2025 | Index ID: #159

The intellectual landscape of the late 20th century was defined by a seismic shift in social theory, characterized by the rise of postmodernism and poststructuralism. Among the most rigorous intellectual rebuttals to this trend is Alex Callinicos's seminal work, **Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique** (1989). This text serves as a foundational pillar for those seeking to defend the Enlightenment project and the validity of **Historical Materialism** against what Callinicos identifies as the 'idealist irrationalism' of postmodern thought. To understand the gravity of this critique, one must dissect the intersection of political economy, epistemology, and cultural theory, evaluating whether postmodernity represents a genuine historical break or merely a cultural facet of **Late Capitalism**.

The Theoretical Genesis: Postmodernism vs. Historical Materialism

Postmodernism is often defined by Jean-François Lyotard's famous aphorism: 'incredulity toward meta-narratives.' This stance rejects the possibility of universal truths or 'grand narratives' like the Enlightenment's promise of progress, science's claim to objectivity, or Marxism's theory of historical development. For the postmodernist, reality is a fragmented collection of discourses, where 'power' is omnipresent and decentralized, and 'truth' is a localized, social construct.

In contrast, the Marxist framework—specifically the one defended by Callinicos—is rooted in **Objective Realism** and **Structural Analysis**. It asserts that while human consciousness is shaped by social conditions, there remains an objective reality governed by the **Mode of Production**. The Marxist critique of postmodernism argues that the latter is not a neutral philosophical discovery but an ideological reflection of the socio-economic shifts occurring in the global North during the 1970s and 1980s, specifically the transition from Fordism to flexible accumulation.

The Rejection of the 'Postmodern Break'

A central tenet of Callinicos's argument is the interrogation of the 'postmodern break.' Postmodern theorists such as Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson (though Jameson critiques it from within) suggest that we have entered a new era where the distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture has collapsed, and 'simulacra' (copies without originals) have replaced reality. Callinicos challenges this by questioning the empirical evidence for such a radical discontinuity. He argues that the aesthetic features identified as 'postmodern'—pastiche, irony, and fragmentation—are in fact continuations or intensifications of **Modernism**, rather than a departure from it.

Technical Breakdown: The Core Mechanics of Callinicos's Critique

The critique offered by Callinicos operates across three distinct levels: the philosophical (poststructuralism), the aesthetic (postmodern art), and the socio-economic (the post-industrial society). Each level requires a technical deconstruction to understand how they coalesce into a singular ideological force.

1. The Philosophical Critique: Poststructuralism and Irrationalism

Callinicos directs significant attention toward the works of Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. He classifies their efforts as 'idealist irrationalism' because they prioritize language and discourse over material reality. In the poststructuralist view, the 'subject' (the individual human agent) is 'decentered' or declared 'dead.'

Callinicos argues that this removal of the subject makes collective political action impossible. If there is no coherent subject and no objective truth, there is no basis for a movement to challenge the status quo.

2. The Aesthetic Critique: From Modernism to Pastiche

The transition in art and architecture is often cited as the primary evidence for postmodernity. Callinicos examines the shift from the functionalist 'International Style' of modern architecture to the eclectic, historical-referencing style of postmodernism. He contends that this is not a sign of cultural liberation but of **Cultural Exhaustion**. By recycling styles from the past, postmodern art fails to engage with the present in a revolutionary way, leading to what he calls 'pastiche'—imitation without the subversive intent of parody.

3. The Socio-Economic Critique: The Myth of Post-Industrialism

Perhaps the most vital part of the Marxist critique is the analysis of the economic base. Postmodernists often link their theories to the rise of a 'post-industrial society' where services and information have replaced manufacturing and labor. Callinicos, drawing on the work of **Ernest Mandel**, argues that we are not in a post-industrial age but in the era of **Late Capitalism**. In this phase, capitalism has not been replaced; it has become more pervasive, commodifying aspects of life that were previously outside the market, including culture and the psyche.

Comparative Analysis: Marxism vs. Postmodernism

The following table provides a structured evaluation of the divergent perspectives between the Marxist framework (as defended by Callinicos) and the Postmodernist framework across key theoretical dimensions.

Feature	Marxist Framework (Historical Materialism)	Postmodernist Framework (Poststructuralism)
Ontology	Materialist: Reality exists independently of thought.	Discursive: Reality is constructed through language/discourse.

The Paradox of Postmodern 'Radicalism'

Callinicos points out a critical paradox in postmodern thought: while it claims to be more radical than Marxism by questioning everything, including 'reason' itself, it ultimately leads to political **quietism**. By denying the existence of a central structure of power (like Capital) and a universal human interest, postmodernism leaves individuals with no tools for systematic resistance. If all 'grand narratives' are oppressive, then the narrative of liberation is also dismissed as a form of totalizing control.

Step-by-Step Procedure for a Marxist Technical Analysis of Culture

To apply the Callinicos-style critique to a contemporary cultural or social phenomenon, researchers can follow this methodological workflow:

1. Identify the Commodity Form: Determine how the phenomenon is integrated into the capitalist market. Is it a product of 'flexible accumulation'?
2. Analyze the Discursive Layer: Strip away the 'postmodern' claims of fragmentation or irony. Ask: Does this discourse obscure the underlying class relations?
3. Evaluate the Historical Context: Locate the phenomenon within the trajectory of Late Capitalism. Is this a 'new' development, or a recycled modernism?
4. Test for Universalism: Assess whether the phenomenon makes claims that exclude the possibility of collective, universal human struggle.
5. Synthesize via Base and Superstructure: Connect the cultural 'superstructure' back to the economic 'base' to reveal the ideological function of the work.

Case Study: The 'Digital Nomad' and Post-Fordist Ideology

A modern application of this critique can be seen in the rise of the 'digital nomad.' Postmodern theorists might celebrate this as the ultimate liberation of the subject from fixed structures and the 'grand narrative' of the 9-to-5 job. They would highlight the fluidity of identity and the rejection of traditional geographic boundaries.

However, a Marxist critique using the Callinicos framework would reveal a different reality:

- Labor Precarity: The digital nomad is often a worker subjected to the extreme 'flexible' labor markets of late capitalism, lacking the protections of the Fordist era.
- Technological Determinism: The 'freedom' is mediated by digital platforms owned by mega-corporations (e.g., Google, Meta), reinforcing a centralized structure of capital.
- Commodification of Experience: Travel and lifestyle are turned into data points and marketing assets, serving the 'pastiche' of postmodern culture.

By applying this analysis, we see that the digital nomad is not a 'postmodern' break from capitalism but its most refined expression: a worker who provides their own infrastructure and carries the factory in their laptop.

Technical Challenges and Potential Failure Modes

While the Marxist critique is robust, it faces specific challenges in the contemporary era. Researchers must be wary

of these common errors when applying Callinicos's theories:

Failure Mode	Description	Solution
Economic Reductionism	Assuming culture is a simple, direct mirror of the economy.	Employ Althusserian 'relative autonomy' or Callinicos's nuanced structuralism.
Nostalgic Modernism	Rejecting all new cultural forms simply because they aren't 'classic' modernism.	Analyze the functional role of the new form in current capital accumulation.
Ignoring Intersectionality	Failing to see how race/gender interact with class within the critique.	Integrate Social Reproduction Theory to broaden the materialist scope.

The Role of 'Grand Narratives' Today

The resurgence of global crises—climate change, pandemics, and systemic inequality—has brought 'grand narratives' back to the forefront. Postmodernism's focus on the local and the fragmented is increasingly seen as inadequate for addressing global existential threats. Callinicos's defense of a systemic, totalizing (but not totalitarian) analysis of the world system provides the intellectual architecture needed to navigate these challenges.

Synthesis: The Persistence of Historical Materialism

The enduring relevance of **Against Postmodernism** lies in its refusal to succumb to intellectual fashion. Callinicos correctly identified that postmodernism was the 'cultural logic' of a specific historical moment—one defined by the defeat of the labor movements in the 1980s and the seeming triumph of neoliberalism. However, as the internal contradictions of capitalism continue to manifest in more volatile ways, the need for a coherent, structural analysis becomes paramount.

The critique of irrationalism is not merely a philosophical exercise; it is a political necessity. If we accept the postmodern premise that 'truth' is nothing more than 'power,' we cede the ground to those who currently hold power. By maintaining the Enlightenment's commitment to reason, science, and universal human liberation, Marxism—as articulated by Callinicos—offers a path beyond the nihilism of the postmodern condition. The 'radical break' was an illusion; the struggle for a rational and just society remains the central task of our era. This necessitates a return to rigorous materialist analysis, where culture is understood not as a playground of infinite signs, but as a battlefield of competing social interests.

In the final analysis, postmodernism appears less like a new era and more like a detour in the long history of modern capitalism—a detour that Callinicos meticulously mapped and challenged, reminding us that to change the world, we must first believe it is possible to understand it.

Tags: [#Marxism](#) [#Postmodernism](#) [#Alex Callinicos](#) [#Historical Materialism](#) [#Critical Theory](#) [#Political Economy](#)

