

Culturism and Modernism: An Academic Odyssey

by John K. Press (March 2016)

Let's take a journey together, towards my explosion, shall we? I recently spoke at the annual English Language Literature Association of Korea (ELLAK) conference in Busan, Korea. On my panel, a young Chinese woman explained a book under the title "race, modernism, and modernity." The book's 1930s protagonist, she told us, was racist because she believed that London was more modern than her Caribbean Island home. The young Chinese woman argued that book's presumption that London was modern and that the Caribbean was not justified imperialism.

Not wanting to embarrass her in front of the thirty or so audience members, after our talk, I asked her, "Don't you believe in progress?" If she said 'No' I would ask her if our replacing fire with light bulbs or if the West's doubling our life span was a good thing. To my surprise, she said she believed in progress. She confessed that she was actually very right-wing! "But, your speech said the Caribbean was just as modern as London! Do you admit that it isn't just racism, the West is more advanced?" "Yeah," she blushed, "I've been struggling with that."

This was the most hopeful confession I heard all day. Because almost every other panel I went to focused on the West being racist. "Why don't black people write and Korean's enjoy Science Fiction?" the keynote speaker, Shelley Streeby (UCSD), asked. Because Sci-Fi is written from the perspective male western racists conquering other planets and seeing their inhabitants as aliens. "I'm sorry," I muttered to myself, barely able to keep from screaming in the back of the room, "I don't know much about Sci-Fi, but the Matrix was about fighting the imperial powers and so was Star Wars. Star Trek's main directive was to not interfere with other civilizations."

I am in exile in Korea. Conservatives do not get hired in western academia. In my last Korean conference, I spoke *for* culturism and *against* multiculturalism. I was allowed to speak. In this conference I claimed that we need to use literary

Darwinism to argue for conservative policies, just like Matthew Arnold did.

In Korea, dissent is allowed. But, still, the conferences featured many visiting American Marxists. And, having been so brow beaten in American academia, I reflexively bite my tongue as they spewed their Marxist bile. At the last session of the three-day conference, I finally exploded.

In a large crowded hall, Curtis Marez (UCSD) spoke of "Agribusiness and Farm Workers Futurisms." He argued that "White male heteronormative patriarchy" was kept in place by agribusinesses fantasies of replacing Mexicans with robots. A handrail rope around a robot at a 1950s agricultural conference showed Whites' desire to control Mexican sexuality. A film from the same 1950s conference depicted white males as scientists and Mexicans as mere implementers. Racist! This, Marez said, with no sense of irony, even thought Mexicans had been "early adapters" of video cameras in an attempt to "return the gaze."

In the same closing panel Miseong Woo (Yonsei University) wondered about what a new big futuristic building in Seoul, Korea (the Dongdaemun Design Plaza) said about Korea's place in modernity. She noted that it replaced a historic Korean baseball stadium. And, that it featured western fashion shows and Andy Warhol exhibits. She used this to wonder about Korea's capitulation to the dominant Western vision of modernism. Though subtle, she still portrayed the West as the oppressor, via standards of modernity, progress and development.

I could no longer bite my lip. When they called for question my hand went up first. Seeing my jut up, the moderator called on me. "I am a culturist and so opposed to multiculturalism in that I take culture seriously. This whole conference has been premised on the idea that if the West is ahead, it is due to our racism and oppression. But, perhaps the film shows more white male scientists because our Protestant culture's love of education has led to more inventions!" Then in a statement that brought audible gasps, I challenged the panelists, "Can you name one thing that a Mexican has invented?" There was a gasp and a silence.

Seizing the void I continued my exasperated rant, "As to modernism. It isn't western any more! You started your speech saying this was the decade of migration. It is the decade of migration to the West! Korea has only three

percent foreigners and half of them are of Korean descent. Modernity belongs to culturist countries that keep their culture intact and united. The Western cities, like LA and New York are museums of demise. And why? Because they are third world. You should take pride in your modern buildings.”

“Is there a question?” a butch-dyke “woman” on the panel, who had spoken on Karaoke being a place of queer resistance to patriarchy, butted in to stop me. And, she was right. I was spewing frustration from days of biting my tongue. “Well,” I scrambled, “could you comment on the possibility that the West was modern because its culture made it an inventor, not racism or oppression?” I asked with a veneer of being collected.

“Well,” she said, “First of all, I have no idea what you’re talking about, LA is building a new building (I didn’t catch the building’s name) that is costing millions of dollars. It is very modern. And, migration is everywhere. Filipinos are going all over Asia. So, you’re just wrong. And, it’s like you’re trying to rewrite history into some sort of Reagan-esque vision.” And then, completely unable to believe that anyone would say this, she gave me the ultimate sneer putdown. “It’s like you’re trying to say that we should be proud of America or something, that America is good.”

“Yes! Yes! Yes! That is exactly it!” I said with wild jabbing gestures. At that the moderator stopped the horror, “We have no more time for questions. Let’s thank the panelists.” At the end, I tried to approach and speak with the panelists, but they refused to acknowledge my greetings! And, I skipped the conference banquet as I sadly concluded that I had now also ruined my reputation in Korea and would be barred from speaking to this literature conference again. Better to slink away and be anonymous.

And, now for my take home lessons about modernity:

Yes. The Sci-Fi looking modernist buildings the panelist discussed, pretend to be from outer space and look like they don’t come from any particular culture. But, Sci-Fi buildings are not global. As my co-presenter would only secretly admit, the Caribbean does not have their own modernism and neither does Africa. They only have dreams of developing. Mexican modernism is an oxymoron. Poor countries are poor. Now here is the real shocker: modernism is no longer western, it is Asian.

Professor Woo was wrong. I don't care if LA is building a new building – it likely has a grand total of 10 sky scrapers and most of those are old. Busan, the Korean city where the conference was held, has dozens of amazing skyscrapers. And don't even get me started on New York. It houses the most famous modernist building ever: Le Corbusier's United Nation's headquarters in New York City. And, I note this because it is when the US became the UN it lost the first world character. But New York is largely just a museum of just such old modernist buildings.

Woo's was partially wrong. The modernist building was Korean. Having a futuristic first-world economy depends on an educated population. Asia has a long history of revering education and remembers it. The US had the Protestant work ethic: the Puritans created Harvard 16 years after arriving on American shores. But, having forgotten our cultural roots, we have fallen into multiculturalism, hedonism and relativism and so can no longer sustain modernist pretensions. Korea is now modern in a way that the US is not. It should take pride in its many amazing modern buildings.

Multiculturalism has caused our decline by undermining striving for progress. It teaches us that all cultures are already equal. It denies our Protestant cultural history – the roots of our greatness. Worse yet – as this conference and my fight epitomized – multiculturalism says we should feel guilty for having taken pride in our culture. As culture means nothing to western academics, they say our modernism only reflected western racism and imperialism. And, this guilt, I would hazard, feeds the nihilistic hedonism in our culture.

For us to be modern again, the West must once again become culturist! It must acknowledge its traditional majority culture rooted in Protestantism and the Enlightenment. Both parts gave us respect for education and a sense of having a calling concerning the future and the individual. We must remember why we were called 'the New World.' We must reclaim the noble experiment that asks if individual men can rationally guide their individual and collective lives towards a brighter future. Pride and a basis for being moral will follow.

OK. Before ending my rant on modernism, I want to point out what isn't modern: academics repeating 1960s clichés about western dominance and racism. Memo to Asia: please note how old western cities look; to stay modern, Asian conferences must not invite these sad western Marxist 1960s relics. Be Asian, be culturist,

be futurist, be modern, mock the West's Marxist "academics." If you continue to invite and revere them, their PC, cultural marxists BS will cause you to go into exile and at that time, there may be no other modern nation into which to flee.

And so this academic journey to Asia comes to an end. But, if you ever wish to see modernism, come to Seoul; go to Shanghai. Along with ruminating about what could have been in the West, it will give you some optimism about mankind's continuing journey towards the future.

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