

Postmodernism and accounting: Mirror or myth?

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Abstract

Words such as postmodernism and postmodern have become part of our vocabulary and are used in everyday conversations. However, the underlying concepts and ideas are generally diffuse and defy concise definition and exact classification.

This article examines the concepts and ideas of postmodernism and their implications for accounting. It is accepted that postmodernism does not necessarily replace modernism entirely. Rather, it represents a modification of modernism.

Some of the implications of a postmodern world for an essentially modern subject, such as accounting, are differentiated in this article. For example, accounting may be required to become more flexible and address the needs of various stakeholders, whilst barriers between itself and other subjects, disciplines and areas of interest may decline in importance or may even disappear.

Key words:

Postmodernism

Modernism

Modernity

Accounting

Accounting profession

1 Introduction

Many authors have stated that the societal, technological, political, economic, intellectual and cultural developments that have occurred in the past few decades reflect such a profound change in the way we live and think that it is justified to say that we have entered into a new era, namely the era of postmodernism (Pippin 1991; Jencks 1996; Harvey 1989). Postmodernism has arisen as a reaction to disillusionment and disenchantment with modernism. A postmodern perspective identifies the existence of many realities; it views events as

transitory, the self as fragmented and decentered, and ideas as constantly changing. It refuses to recognise the existence of universal laws and grand theories (Montagna 1997).

The term postmodernism is essentially an umbrella term, which is used for overlapping, and sometimes even conflicting, ideas in fields of knowledge that are as diverse as philosophy, the arts, architecture, theology and economics. This is why the term is often used loosely in conversations, without a thorough understanding of its complex and elusive nature. Lötter (1995: 35) suggests that a perusal of texts on postmodernism leaves the reader with an impression similar to Sartre's impression of existentialism, namely:

Most of those who are making use of this word would be highly confused if required to explain its meaning. For since it has become fashionable, people cheerfully declare that this musician or that painter is an existentialist ... indeed, the word is now so loosely applied to so many things that it no longer means anything at all (Sartre 1948: 25, 26).

To mirror the playful and ephemeral quality, the lack of depth and irony so pervasive in postmodern thought, the authors of this article should recommend to our readers of this text (and not of this article) to use the term postmodernism extensively in their discourses (not their conversations), even if they have a limited understanding of it, if only for the sake of appearance.

As intimated by the title of this article, the text addresses the implications that postmodernism holds for accounting and the accounting profession. A lively (if limited) debate on the issue has been raging in accounting since 1993 (Graves & Goldwater 1997:1). This discourse culminated in a conference held in Florida in 1995 and an issue of the journal *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* (1997) which was devoted to the subject. The debate centered around two issues:

- whether we have entered a postmodern age or whether we continue to live under modern conditions, and
- Whether accounting is intrinsically reductionist and modern, or whether accounting can adapt to postmodern conditions and fulfil play a meaningful role in a postmodern world.

The contributors to the debate expressed divergent views. For Cooper *et al.* (1998), postmodernity has superseded modernity, while accounting has remained an instrument of the modernist project. On the other hand, Gallhofer and Haslam (1995) doubt the existence of a widespread postmodern consciousness, especially outside academia, and perceive accounting to be a *residuum* of modernity.

In South Africa, Savage (1995) provided a postmodern perspective on the scientific status of accounting by contrasting the work of Thomas Kuhn (1970), who she views as a modernist, to that of Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984), who she views as a postmodernist. Savage concluded that, instead of viewing accounting as a multi-paradigmatic science (Belkaoui 1992), which is currently in a state of crisis, it could be viewed as a discipline that is simply becoming attuned to the postmodern conditions which typically displays features such as fragmentation and competing discourses.

The aforementioned literature arguably did not address the second issue adequately, and therefore the purpose of this article is:

- to consider the relevant literature regarding the existence of postmodernism (Is it mirror or myth?); and
- to consider some of the implications that postmodernism has and may have for accounting and the accounting profession.

The article commences by providing a brief overview of the nature and development of modernism. An understanding of modernism is considered essentially, because postmodernism is a product of (or as stated above, a reaction to) modernity and can therefore only be understood in relation to modernism. Thereafter follows a brief exposition of the various ideas and beliefs of postmodernism. In the next section, some of the implications of postmodernism for accounting are considered. The article concludes with some remarks.

2 Modernism

Modernism is a societal, intellectual and cultural development that emerged as a result of the Enlightenment that ended the Renaissance. Giddens (1990:1, in Lötter 1995:39) suggests that the Enlightenment commenced in the course of the seventeenth century. Cahoone (1988:1) defines modernity as the ideas, principles and patterns of interpretation, of diverse kinds, ranging from the philosophic to the economic, on which western and central European and American society and culture, from the sixteen through the twentieth centuries, increasingly found itself to be based.

Modernism is viewed as a unique movement in human history, which represents a break with pre-modernity or antiquity. Harvey (1989) identifies five relatively isolated eras in recent human history as being feudalism, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, modernism and, finally, postmodernism. According to Pippen (1991:4), the development of modernism had the following implications:

- Emergence of the nation state (as opposed to the feudal system and the dominance of the church);
- belief in the power of science (also in respect of the investigation of human phenomena);
- demystification of life, especially through science;
- emphasis on individual rights and freedom;
- development of a free-market economy;
- general belief in the developmental potential of mankind; and
- adherence to Christian values such as tolerance, sympathy, charity and prudence.

It is important to emphasise the role of the scientific method, claims regarding the power of science and the concept of rationality in modernity. These views imply that man has the ability to identify problems, find solutions and implement the solutions to the advantage of all mankind. Furthermore, it is held that the world can be divided into subjects and objects and that it is possible to develop a meta-framework or theory that can explain all phenomena. No problem is too large for scientific investigation. All that is required is to differentiate the problem into smaller problems (or particles), which are small enough to be solved one by one.

The concept of rationality implies that a researcher can view a research problem objectively, i.e. from the outside, without influencing it, and thereafter present *the* (possible) answer to the problem. Pippin (1991:23) suggests that modernism's early philosophic self-understanding has been captured most concretely by Descartes' famous radical doubt, an extreme rejection of everything that is accepted on the basis of trust, authority, tradition, common sense, i.e. a suspension of our inclination to accept things spontaneously and the commencement of reflection on the grounds of the immediate appearance of things. Descartes believed that if we could discover the appropriate method, if a procedure could be constructed of which the rules could generally be argued to produce safe or even certain outcomes that could be repeated in other experiments at other times and places, it would be the tool needed to master the elusive, deceptive, natural world. Consequently, Descartes considered objectivity to be central to the construction of knowledge, and perceived subjectivity, or the blurring of boundaries between self and the world, to be a serious epistemological threat (Bordo 1996:639).

Another important pillar of the modern worldview is the mechanistic Newtonian perspective on the world. Newton believed that the world operates like a large machine, which can be understood by investigating the individual parts, the sum of the parts being (more or less) equal to the whole. Wheatley

(1994:9) suggests that the Newtonian model of the world is characterised by materialism and reductionism - a focus on things rather than on relationships and a search in the field of physics for the basic building blocks of matter. She (1994:26) notes that, as a result of the influence of Newton and Descartes on modern thought, we have prided ourselves on the triumphs of reason and on the absence of magic. A typical application of a modern view is to argue that all the current environmental problems faced by the world can be solved. For example, science will find a solution for the hole in the ozone layer, the amount of greenhouse gases released and the destruction of rain forests around the world.

Although it was largely Newton and Descartes who provided the philosophical foundations of modernity, the term modernity was first coined by Baudelaire in 1863 in his seminal essay entitled *The painter of modern life* (Montagna 1997:127). Baudelaire's view is that: *Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent, it is the one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immutable* (in Harvey 1989:10). Cahoon (1995:8-13) extended this definition by identifying the following characteristics of a modernistic society: It is a society that is *inter alia*:

- dynamic, subject to change and that encourages change;
- characterised by progress, especially in the field of science and technology;
- in the process of integration, through political centralisation and growing interdependence;
- disintegrating, through specialisation, fragmentation, pluralisation and loss of tradition;
- rational, in its movement away from religious faith and towards scientific explanations, coupled with scepticism, goal-orientation and bureaucracy;
- characterised by the prevalence of individual rights, autonomy and self-legislation;
- increasingly displays functionalisation and redefines human existence as being primarily of an economic nature.

Perhaps Cahoon (1996:12) summarises a modern society best by stating that it characterises itself as being: *founded on scientific knowledge of the world, rational knowledge of value, which places the highest premium on individual life and freedom and believes that such freedom and rationality will lead to social progress through virtuous, self-controlled work, creating a better material, political and intellectual life for all*. However, this self-image creates expectations which cannot always be fulfilled and has led to the questioning of the very foundations of modernism and (as discussed in the next section) to the development of postmodernism. In a sense, the expectations and optimism, based on a mechanistic and rational view of world, was a source of hope, but it also harboured the seeds of the destruction of modernity.

3 Postmodernism

The unrequited optimism and expectations referred to above resulted in the loss of faith and confidence in modernity and contributed to the development of postmodern ideas. According to Lyotard (1996:482), postmodernism represents a loss of faith in the grand theories (meta-narratives) of modernity, such as the dialectics of spirit, hermeneutics of meaning, emancipation of the rational and working subject, or creation of wealth. The idea that no meta-narrative is possible led Rorty (1996:573) to assert that there is a convergence on pragmatism.

Another important change in orientation that occurred, was the acceptance of a reduced emphasis on objectivity in favour of subjectivity. Subjectivity in this context implies the merging of self with the world (contrary to the convictions of Descartes) and the inability to generate knowledge that is neutral, free from bias, value free and verifiable. Zukav (1979:56) contends that this subjectivity views man as being an integral part of nature and that therefore man cannot observe reality without changing it. Loubser (1997:48, in Coetzee 1998:87) confirms that a crisis of confidence took place in the human mind, which challenged the notion of objectivity and that leaves latitude only for shades of subjectivity, while Shin (1994:16) suggests that reference was already being made to life after the collapse of scientific objectivism.

Whereas the modern is preoccupied with epistemological questions, such as the nature of knowledge and the means of acquiring knowledge, postmodernism concentrates on ontological questions, such as the nature of reality and the relationship between mankind and reality (McHale, 1987 in Harvey 1989:41). Postmodernism views the world as consisting of many realities, which are socially constructed by the self. Hoksbergen (1994:687) identifies this view as being part of the most radical postmodern tradition, which is based on the French postmodernism of Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard. These thinkers argue that everyone constructs his or her own reality and that it is not possible to compare the various realities, because there are no independent criteria on which to base such comparison. Postmodernism recognises that the many realities created, are influenced by metaphysical matters such as traditions, values and norms.

The role of language, language games (Wittgenstein 1963) and discourse (Lyotard 1984) are central to the postmodern debate. Postmodernism suggests that there is no neutral, objective, scientific language and that no language exists beyond the realm of tradition (Hoksberger 1994:681). This implies that no evaluation, research or assessment, is possible without becoming familiar with the language, and also with metaphysical aspects such as norms, values, beliefs and traditions, of a particular problem, theory, phenomenon, culture, etc.

Savage (1995:5) notes that for Lyotard, dissensus (fundamental disagreement), rather than consensus, and paralogy (instability in theoretical explanation), rather than homology, are endemic to all discourse among scientists. In other words, the accumulation of knowledge in a postmodernist approach to science, progresses through disagreement and instability (stability only creates stagnation). Consequently, it can be argued that anyone can do research. This results in the destruction of the elitist position of researchers and scientists in modernism in favour of storytelling, by anyone so inclined.

The importance of language and recognition of metaphysical influences raises the issue of commensurability: To what extent can one immerse oneself in another culture, language or tradition in order to extend the boundaries of postmodern knowledge? Postmodernists believe that the problem can only be addressed through discourse and communication. Rorty (1979 in Hoksberger 1994: 685) argues that the real task of inquiry is *to keep the conversation going*, both in terms of normal discourse (i.e. conversation within a tradition such as accounting) and abnormal discourse (i.e. conversation across traditions). In this sense, postmodernism encourages interdisciplinary discourse and interdisciplinary research. Postmodernism also provides a haven for the marginalised and alienated people of society, because it questions the foundations of society and of science. It suggests that these foundations merely represent the views of one tradition, and it therefore recognises the existence of other views.

Postmodernism refutes the possibility of discovering the origins of the self, the assumption of which possibility formed the basis of several modern philosophies such as existentialism, psychoanalysis and phenomenology. Cahoone (1996:15) states that postmodernism rejects the possibility of returning to, recapturing or even representing the origin or source of any deeper reality beyond phenomena, and casts doubt on (and even denies) its existence. Some postmodern writers argue that there is not only one self, but many selves, giving rise to the idea of schizophrenia in postmodernism (Hassan 1985; Harvey 1989). In a sense, postmodernism is intentionally superficial and preoccupied with the surface by eschewing rigorous analysis.

Any attempt to define postmodernism accurately and comprehensively is doomed. This is because of three major anomalies. The first anomaly is that the process of defining and describing an idea is modernistic, and therefore contrary to postmodern thinking. To any idea there are many possible definitions, perspectives and discourses, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Secondly, our ideas are expressed through language, which is founded on modernism, and it therefore critically limits our ability to describe

postmodernism (Arrington 1997:3). Thirdly, any attempt to reconstruct a historical review of events and ideas that lead to postmodernism is in itself a modern approach (Montagna 1997).

In support of the first anomaly, postmodern thinking postulates that truth is contextual rather than absolute (Cahoone 1995:14). In addition, no one has a monopoly on truth. One person's view is as valid as another's and one person's definition is as valid as another's. Montagna (1997:130) posits that postmodernity argues that things have no underlying reality; what is real, is what we define socially as being real. There are as many meanings to a text as there are interpretations of it; therefore all discourse is rhetorical. The authors of this text also know no better than do any of its readers and therefore the authors have no exclusive right to define any concept. This position may be problematic for the individual who does not know which truth to create or to utilise (Montagna 1997:131; Yuthas & Dillard 1999:48).

Regarding the second anomaly, namely that our language and ideas are modern, Arrington (1987:3) submits that the *schooling, the texts, the conversations and the intellectual attitudes which have constituted us intellectually are largely products of a post-sixteenth century way of thinking about the world ... the urge to critique the modern is arduous if not thwarted by the awareness that the very resources available – our language and our ideas – are themselves modern.*

The third obstacle arises from the fact that for postmodernists there are no lessons to be learnt from history. This idea derives from the belief that changes in society are not necessarily for the better: there is no progress. In the words of Yuthas & Dillard (1999:48): *advances in technology are no guarantee of social progress.* History is only the multiple ever-changing meanings applied to events (Montagna 1997:125). This does not mean that postmodernists are averse to using historical events, designs and ideas, juxtaposed to or combined with current events and beliefs in a collage or montage. This approach is most evident in (but not restricted to) postmodern architecture and art (Jenks 1996:472, Harvey 1989:57). Postmodernists may refer to historic events and systems, but because there is no belief in historical progress, there is nothing to learn from it and time and space are compressed (Harvey 1989:201).

As a result of the major conundrum presented by the first anomaly mentioned above, it is futile to attempt to define postmodernism comprehensively and conclusively. This entire section is presented as a series of – somewhat brief and fragmented – perspectives on postmodernism, and no attempt is made to present a concise definition.

If postmodernism is so difficult to pin down by means of a simple definition, the question remains whether it actually exists or whether it is an illusion or myth, or perhaps even a mirror of modern criticisms (Yuthas & Dillard 1999:47). Cahoone (1995:1) believes in the existence of modernity and its contemporary modification, while remaining dubious about whether the latter is severe enough to warrant the label *postmodern*. From this comment, several questions arise regarding postmodernism, namely whether it is ushering in a new intellectual and cultural era, which will effectively replace modernity as we know it or whether it represents a major modification of current modernity or whether it is merely an extension of modernity. Giddens (1990) suggests that postmodernism is merely modernity coming to terms with itself. *While being critical of modernity, postmodern thought is nonetheless deeply indebted to the ideals of the modern age, in that sense, postmodernism is a continuation of the modern* (Shin 1994:18 in Coetzee 1998:91). Fogarty (1997:57) contends that there is no consensus on the timing or the inevitability of the replacement of modernity by postmodernism. It is apparent that authors acknowledge the existence of postmodernism, refuting the claim that it is a modern-day *myth*.

However, authors on postmodernism differ on the extent to which postmodernism will replace, modify or continue modernity. For the purposes of this article, it is assumed that postmodernism is a major modification of modernity, but that it will not replace the latter. Postmodernism *mirrors* the dissatisfaction and disenchantment with modernism by introducing changes (albeit sometimes radical changes) to our ontological, epistemological, sociological and methodological perspectives (Burrell and Morgan 1979). In the relevant literature, the term mirror is closely associated with postmodernism in that it represents the multiplication, fragmentation, deconstruction, narcissism and superficiality of postmodernism (Viljoen 1995; Harvey 1989; Rorty 1979 and Fokkema 1984).

In order to bring postmodernism closer to the subject of accounting, this section on postmodernism is concluded by considering some of the economic, managerial and organisational perspectives on postmodernism. The authors posit that accounting, Economics, Management Science and Organisational Theory are related disciplines (traditions) and that the impact of postmodernism on these disciplines has some similarities.

According to Van Veuren (1995:135), the following economic terms have postmodern connotations:

- Market niche: small markets for specialised goods;
- subcontracting: a method of decentralisation; and
- networking: informal, flexible organisation.

Furthermore, Van Veuren (1995:136) claims the following injunctions or slogans for postmodernism:

- liberalise: break down barriers between management and staff and also hierarchical structures;
- disorganise: experiment, loosen control, take risks and trust to luck; and
- fire middle management: get rid of hierarchy and shorten decision-making time.

Successful companies in the postmodern era can be compared to a carnival (Van Veuren 1995:137-38), displaying the following characteristics:

- a good overall image;
- a sound infrastructure (hygiene factors);
- products and the methods of displaying and selling them change quickly in accordance with customer demand;
- being dynamic and constantly changing;
- low overheads and a multi-entrepreneurial orientation; and
- encouraging customisation by customers.

The emphasis on informality and flexibility is evident from the above economic perspectives on postmodernism. According to Harvey (1989:147-165), the mode of regulation in the postmodern organisation is flexible accumulation. Flexibility is evident in production, the labour market, patterns of consumption and capital available through global capital markets.

Nohria and Berkley (1994) see the postmodern organisation as a virtual organisation in which the hard copy file is replaced by electronic recordkeeping; face-to-face communication is replaced by electronic communication; the organisation is not structured around human beings, but around information; the boundaries of organisations disappear as a result of networking; and job descriptions are replaced by global, computer-mediated and cross-functional tasks.

To summarise, the relevant literature indicates that the following phenomena are the result of an increasing trend towards postmodernism: informality, globalisation, customisation, flexibility, a just-in-time orientation, knowledge workers and information-based companies.

4 Implications for accounting

Accounting, as a discipline, is firmly embedded in a modern view of the world. Hines (1989:55) identifies the following underlying assumptions of accounting:

- Reality exists independently of thought, language and social practices;
- Accounting information is an economic good, the demand for which relates to the fact that it reflects reality;
- Accounting functions in an environment of competitive markets; and
- users and producers of accounting information behave rationally.

From the discussion of postmodernism above, it is clear that assumptions one and four are contrary to postmodern thinking. Assumption two, namely that accounting information reflects reality, is problematic from a postmodern perspective, because it is impossible for an abstraction to reflect the full extent of reality. In the previous section, reference was also made to the postmodern postulate that many realities may exist. Assumption three (as well as assumptions two and four) refers to the neo-classical economic school of thought (Fogarty 1997:46). This construct and its underlying assumptions are modern (Blignaut 1997).

Some other assumptions and cornerstones of accounting, according to the Accounting Framework (SAICA 1990), are:

- reliability (par.31-38);
- faithful representation (*There is some risk of being less than faithful in representation, yet this is not due to bias, but rather to difficulty with measurement*) (par.33-34);
- neutrality (also specified as *free from bias*) (par.36);
- completeness (par.38); and
- true and fair view/fair presentation (par.46).

These ideas are equally untenable for someone who holds a postmodern worldview. It is simply not possible for an accountant or an auditor to give a faithful representation, be neutral and complete as well as present a true and fair view in a single representation (i.e. in financial statements) of reality (Tinker 1991). According to Tinker's critique on the views of Solomons, the following assumptions of the *Solomons view* do not hold true (1991):

- that accounting data is complete in that the data faithfully represent the underlying economic reality;

- accounting symbols are complete in that they summarise all the relevant interests of members of a community; and
- it is possible to *do accounting* in an apolitical manner.

Perhaps the constant barrage of criticism directed at accounting is a consequence of the fact that accounting is struggling to remain true to its modern foundations in an increasingly postmodern world, in which there is a general belief that these so-called foundations are fatally flawed. Compare in this regard, for example, the criticism of the relevance of accounting by:

- Tinker (1985:28) regarding the *accounting education system that elevates profit and wealth as ends in themselves and fails to articulate the social purpose of profit and its tenuous connections to social welfare*;
- Gray (1994:2) regarding the discipline's *failure to acknowledge its widespread social, economic, political and environmental implications*;
- Gloeck & De Jager (1993) regarding the audit expectation gap;
- Koornhof (1998) regarding the inflexibility of accounting; and
- Gouws & Terblanché (1998) regarding the lack of cybernetic feedback; and
- Lee (1987) regarding its slow rate of innovation.

Naturally, the critics are not necessarily postmodernists. This is indicative of the perpetual problem of the *scientist*. Two individuals may observe the same phenomenon, but interpret it in different ways, depending on the tradition that they adhere to. For example, Gallhofer & Haslam, observe the same developments in accounting as Cooper *et al.*, yet the former authors express doubt regarding a *widespread postmodern consciousness*, whereas the latter authors believe accounting to be modern in a postmodern world and that as such it has *lost all relationship with the economic reality (sic) it purports to represent* (Graves and Goldwater 1997:1).

Despite (or perhaps as a result of) the criticism of accounting, some change has taken place in accounting and continues to take place. An increased awareness and interest in the needs of the users of accounting information (currently defined in much broader terms than in the past) has led to increasing disclosure in areas such as:

- non-financial information;
- future-orientated information;
- environment information; and
- social information.

With regard to accounting education, some of the techniques still taught at universities have been rendered obsolete by postmodern trends. An example of these techniques is standard costing. Whereas it is still a core component of almost all first-year management accounting modules, postmodern ideas in manufacturing, such as just-in-time, require behaviour that differs from that encouraged by standard costing. Why do academics continue to teach increasingly obsolete accounting techniques? The answer is that professional accounting bodies still suggest that it be included in curricula. This requirement could be interpreted as a lack of responsiveness to real needs in the marketplace. Or, alternatively, as mentioned earlier, as an indication of a modern discipline struggling to come to terms with a postmodern world (Savage 1995:7). For example, standard costing is a technique steeped in the modern tradition. It assumes rational behaviour and that the optimisation of each individual's department in a business will lead to the optimisation of the entire business. This assumption does not hold true, because manufacturing goods that do not form part of a final product, and are sold to a paying customer, are of no use to the business as a whole. Similarly, the techniques used in accounting should be re-examined and assessed from a postmodern perspective. Fogarty (1997:50) suggests that accounting education is in fact facing a crisis and that postmodern ideas have not been implemented in accounting curricula. Furthermore, the bureaucratic idea that a particular solution to an accounting problem could be the only (or the best) solution is still subscribed to in accounting education (Giddens 1991 in Fogarty 1997). This view underestimates the active role of human beings in influencing and altering outcomes. Accounting education is still completely modern in its commitment to concepts such as objectivity, economic reality and correct classifications.

Some other implications that should be considered in this context are the role of power and control in setting accounting standards and the political role of accounting in bargaining and in controlling labour. According to Tinker (1991), accounting does not only reflect reality, but also creates it. Even the role of the accounting profession will change as a result of postmodern thought. Montagna (1997:138) believes that *if the goal of modernist professions was the control of knowledge, the goal of postmodern professions could be said to be the diffusion or dissemination of knowledge.*

Accounting has been called a subject without a theory. This is because it is essentially pragmatic in nature. Its origins are to be found in the need to keep a record of amounts owed. It later acquired the elegant double entry system of

recordkeeping, which was again born out of need, and did not result from extensive theoretical deliberations. To this day there is no generally accepted accounting theory, even after repeated attempts, although decision-usefulness probably comes closest to such a theory. A modernist (such as Kuhn) would interpret this state of affairs as being a period of revolution, which will be followed by the acceptance of a specific theory and then a period of calm. Although, as Laughlin (1981) pointed out, it is possible that accounting is still in the pre-science phase of the Kuhnian model (which is also chaotic). Lakatos, who conducted research programmes, would not have been surprised by the prevailing state of affairs in accounting and would (in contrast to Kuhn) have described it as *normal* (Mathews & Perera 1996:42-43). Perhaps his view of science is of a more postmodern nature. Feyerabend (in Mathews & Perera 1996:44) demonstrates that differing theories are sometimes *incommensurable and their existence demonstrates the existence of a subjective element in scientific research*. Furthermore, Feyerabend claims that scientific knowledge is in no way superior to other forms of knowledge and that the institutionalisation of scientific research in our society is incompatible with humanitarianism and individual freedom (Mathews & Perera 1996:44). Feyerabend's views are patently postmodern. According to postmodern thinking, anyone can propose a theory and no one, not even a person in a position of authority, is entitled to an opinion that carries more weight than that of the average person. Postmodernism represents a move towards more pragmatism (Rorty 1979). Perhaps accounting can (and should?) now abandon the quest for a universally accepted theory and revel in its pragmatic nature!

The economic manifestations of postmodernism provide further clues regarding the future role of accounting within organisations (see Van Veuren 1995). The idea of market niches hint at different information and different formats for information provided at different times to different stakeholders. The movement towards subcontracting may point towards an increased decentralisation in the collection and collation of accounting information and free access by stakeholders to the information on an online, real-time basis. In other words, a flexible accounting system, which may encompass other functions, traditionally separated from accounting. This removal of traditional barriers implies networking beyond functional borders, but also beyond organisational borders. Suppliers and customers may be incorporated into a holistic information system. This implies that the scorekeeping role of the accountant will change to that of an information facilitator.

The developments mentioned in the preceding paragraph will inevitably result in the extensive use of technology in the function of reporting. Reporting in a layered fashion, which enables users to choose the areas of interest to them and to obtain progressively more information on these areas, could accommodate these ideas. The accounting profession should cultivate a reporting system that acknowledges that users do not have uniform information requirements. It is also envisaged that there will be increased co-operation between functions such as accounting and marketing, as well as a reporting system that incorporates the needs of both these disciplines, but also the needs of other disciplines such as production. The future should bring with it multimedia presentations, combining videos, graphs, virtual plant tours, etc., customised to the particular needs of interested users.

5 Concluding remarks

Modernism has been labelled the iron cage of mankind (Ray and Reed 1994). When the advances in science and knowledge are considered, it could perhaps be more accurately described as a golden cage, but it nevertheless remains a cage. Herein lies modernity's irony: in its bid to enhance individual freedom, it appears to have achieved the opposite. Postmodernism is a reaction to disillusionment with the modern. In this article, it was assumed that postmodernism would not replace modernism in its entirety, but that it represents a major, even a radical, modification of modernity. Cahoon (1995:21) contends that even if we sincerely and consistently wished to abandon modernity, this may not be possible. In a very basic sense, much of the debate on modernity is less about changing the world than about interpreting it. Postmodernism can therefore be regarded as a mirror and not a myth, a mirror that reflects society's discontent with modernity.

It is apparent from the relevant literature that the impact of postmodernism on society should not be underestimated. It has permeated ideas, discourses, displays, art and architecture to the extent that it should no longer be ignored. In particular, the influence of postmodernism on Economics, Management Science and Organisational Theory has manifested itself in virtual organisations, global economics, a paperless society, flexible accumulation, niche markets, customisation, etc. The theories in these disciplines are being revisited to identify underlying assumptions and concepts linked to rationalism, objectivism and reductionism, which cannot be presumed in an increasingly postmodern world.

The existence of postmodernism, not as a replacement of modernism, but as an extension, or a modification, is assumed in this text. In the section on postmodernism, an attempt is made to capture its principal ideas and beliefs.

In the face of increasing postmodern thinking, accounting and the accounting profession should, in order to remain relevant, face the task of reassessing their view of reality, the nature of knowledge and the role of accounting in society (Koornhof 1997:121). This article identifies some of the issues and dilemmas confronting accounting as a result of postmodernism. It is emphasised that accounting is a modern discipline and that it will continue to be rooted in modernism. However, this does not imply that it is possible to ignore the modifications that may be required as a result of postmodern thought. Montagna (1997:138) warns that *Accounting is reaching a point where in the history of capitalist relations, significant changes in its body of knowledge are required if it is to survive as a profession*. He suggests that accountants should face increasing disagreement on the modern assumptions about the fixed meaning of accounts; accurate representation of objective economic reality; and critical perspectives of interpretative, reflexive knowledge in ever-changing systems.

Perhaps what Cahoon observed regarding the modern (mentioned above), applies equally to accounting in a postmodern world, namely:

Even if we sincerely and consistently wished to abandon modernity (accounting), that may not be possible (or feasible?), and in a very basic sense much of the debate over modernity (and accounting as a modernistic discipline) is less about changing the world than about interpreting it (authors additions in brackets).

If accountants change the way in which they interpret reality (i.e. postmodernistically instead of modernistically), the accounting tradition will be modified to mirror an increasingly postmodern world.

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