

# CONTEXT

Časopis za interdisciplinarne studije  
11:1 (2024), 133-136

Prikaz knjige - Book Review

DOI: 10.55425/23036966.2024.11.1.133

Ziauddin Sardar (Ed.), *The Postnormal Times Reader*, London: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2017. 380 pp. ISBN 978-1-56564-991-0.

The *Postnormal Times Reader* is an essential anthology that seeks to dissect the complexities of our contemporary era. Its editor and contributors use the term “postnormal” to describe the current period, which is characterised by uncertainty, rapid change, and the unpredictable consequences of technological, environmental, economic, and social shifts.

Curated by visionary thinker Ziauddin Sardar, it is a pivotal collection that explores the intricacies of this time of unparalleled upheaval and change. The publication outlines the evolution of postnormal times as explained in Sardar’s writings, and compiles significant essays and studies on the subject. Sardar’s objectives are made clear in the foreword, which offers a summary of the concept and illustrates how it can frame our comprehension of recent occurrences.

This collection of essays and scholarly articles brings together an array of voices and perspectives, each of which delves into the intricacies of our rapidly changing world. It addresses the multifaceted crises and opportunities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, from climate change and technological upheaval to socio-political unrest and pandemic-induced disruption.

## *Overview and Thematic Structure*

The book is divided into four parts, each of which explores a particular facet of postnormality, ranging from the impact of technological innovation on society, to environmental issues, to political, cultural, and spiritual shifts. These are: Foundations and Theory; Approaches and Inquiries; Environment and Chronology; and Biographies and Contributions. The former part gathers texts foundational to the era, and to the concept of postnormal science. Silvio Funtowicz and Jerry Ravetz introduce the framework for the latter in their 1993 article, “Science for the Post-Normal Age”, and present a persuasive case for making science more accessible to the public. The article introduces the idea

of an “extended peer community”, a precursor to the concept of the polylogue, which plays a crucial role in the theory of postnormal times. Ziauddin Sardar’s 2010 article, “Welcome to Postnormal Times” outlines the era’s fundamental principles, and offers a theoretical lens through which to view the present, and to expand our ability to envision future possibilities. To do this, it first delineates the main elements of postnormal times: complexity, chaos, and contradictions. In “Postnormal Times Revisited”, Sardar returns to his earlier arguments and offers an anticipatory examination of how today’s societal trends may influence upcoming generations.

The section on Methods and Questions offers diverse viewpoints on methodologies for broadening the application and understanding of postnormal times as a framework for futuristic thinking. In “The Three Tomorrows of Postnormal Times”, Sardar and John Sweeney detail a method that embraces unknowns and uncertainties to forge and examine future possibilities. Sweeney further illustrates the use of the Three Tomorrows approach through a case study of future internet scenarios in “Infectious Connectivity”. In his 1997 paper “The Science of What If”, Jerry Ravetz advocates for a scientific approach that incorporates a forward-looking and speculative analysis approach, underlining the critical roles of ignorance and uncertainty as foundational to understanding postnormal times. In “Here be Dragons: Exploring Unknown Unknowns”, Shirin Elahi presents a detailed exploration of how uncertainty has been overlooked in thought, science, and organisational structures. The subsequent sections, Space and Time, and Lives and Work, explore a variety of topics and entities through a postnormal lens, from climate change and governance to regional studies on Japan, the European Union, and the Middle East, and in disciplines that include science, religion and cinema. The concluding essay by Alfonso Montuori and Gabrielle Donnelly, “Creativity and Leadership in Postnormal Times”, argues for innovative and foundational rethinking in response to this era of complexity, disorder, and rapid change, and emphasises the imperative to challenge our fundamental beliefs and concerns.

Sardar’s editorial prowess is evident in this collection, which is as broad in its thematic ambitions as it is deep in individual inquiries. The book is structured around the central premise of understanding postnormal times – a term that itself invites reflection on what it means to live in an era that defies traditional norms and predictable patterns.

The anthology takes as its premise the idea that in such times, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity dominate, demanding new ways of thinking and acting.

### *Critical Analysis*

One of the strengths of *The Postnormal Times Reader* is its multidisciplinary approach, in which contributors from various fields offer insights into how their disciplines intersect with the concept. This diversity not only enriches the reader's understanding, but also underscores the complexity of the challenges at hand. While the book excels in diagnosing the ailments of our era, however, it does not aim to propose concrete solutions or frameworks for navigating the postnormal landscape.

Despite the depth and diversity of its essays, *The Postnormal Times Reader* remains remarkably accessible, ensuring that contributions, while intellectually rigorous, are engaging and clear. This accessibility widens the book's appeal, and makes it a valuable resource not only for academics and students, but also for anyone who is interested in grappling with the profound changes that are currently shaping the world.

In the face of environmental degradation and the rise of digital surveillance, the themes explored in *The Postnormal Times Reader* are strikingly relevant. The anthology is a wake-up call, which challenges readers to rethink their ideas of progress, control, and certainty, and contributes to a growing body of literature that seeks to make sense of the complexities and uncertainties of our era.

Under the astute editorship of Ziauddin Sardar, the book is a thought-provoking read that captures the zeitgeist of tumultuous times. While it navigates the terrain of post-normality with insightful analyses and critiques, its true value may lie in the questions it raises, rather than the answers it provides. It invites us to embrace uncertainty, complexity, and plurality as we navigate the uncharted waters of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, making it a must-read for academics, policymakers, and anyone else interested in understanding the profound transformations that are taking place around us.

While the breadth and diversity of *The Postnormal Times Reader* are its strengths, they can also be seen as its limitations. At times, the reader may feel overwhelmed by the sheer range of topics and perspectives, which can make the overarching theme of post-normality seem somewhat diffuse. Additionally, the optimistic tone adopted in some essays when describing the potential for positive change contrasts sharply with the more pessimistic assessments in others, thereby challenging the reader to navigate these differing outlooks alone.

These criticisms do not, however, detract from the book's overall value, but rather reflect the complex reality of these postnormal times, which are messy, contradictory, and difficult to navigate.

The diversity of contributors is a significant asset to the book, which provides a wide range of perspectives and expertise, and allows it to reflect the

rich tapestry of thought on understanding and acting in postnormal times. This approach enriches the reader's understanding, and underscores the complexity of the challenges of the era, which cannot be adequately addressed from a single perspective.

Sardar acknowledges that the conversation surrounding postnormal times is ongoing and evolving, and invites readers to anticipate changes and updates in future editions. At the same time, he assures that the text will consistently prioritise diversity and plurality in its essence.

With an eye on both diversity and accessibility, Ziauddin Sardar has compiled an essential collection for anyone who seeks to understand the contours of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *The Postnormal Times Reader* is a comprehensive overview of the concept it represents, and invites the reader to engage actively with the questions it raises. It is a call to action, urging us to think critically and creatively about how we might navigate the uncharted waters of our time.

*Ardian Muhaj*