

Chapter One

What Postmodernism Is

The postmodern vanguard

By most accounts we have entered a new intellectual age. We are postmodern now. Leading intellectuals tell us that modernism has died, and that a revolutionary era is upon us—an era liberated from the oppressive strictures of the past, but at the same time disquieted by its expectations for the future. Even postmodernism's opponents, surveying the intellectual scene and not liking what they see, acknowledge a new cutting edge. In the intellectual world, there has been a changing of the guard.

The names of the postmodern vanguard are now familiar: Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Richard Rorty. They are its leading strategists. They set the direction of the movement and provide it with its most potent tools. The vanguard is aided by other familiar and often infamous names: Stanley Fish and Frank Lentricchia in literary and legal criticism, Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin in feminist legal criticism, Jacques Lacan in psychology, Robert Venturi and Andreas

Huyssen in architectural criticism, and Luce Irigaray in the criticism of science.

Members of this elite group set the direction and tone for the postmodern intellectual world.

Michel Foucault has identified the major targets: "All my analyses are against the idea of universal necessities in human existence."¹ Such necessities must be swept aside as baggage from the past: "It is meaningless to speak in the name of—or against—Reason, Truth, or Knowledge."²

Richard Rorty has elaborated on that theme, explaining that that is *not* to say that postmodernism is true or that it offers knowledge. Such assertions would be self-contradictory, so postmodernists must use language "ironically."

The difficulty faced by a philosopher who, like myself, is sympathetic to this suggestion [e.g., Foucault's]—one who thinks of himself as auxiliary to the poet rather than to the physicist—is to avoid hinting that this suggestion gets something right, that my sort of philosophy corresponds to the way things really are. For this talk of correspondence brings back just the idea my sort of philosopher wants to get rid of, the idea that the world or the self has an intrinsic nature.³

If there is no world or self to understand and get right on their terms, then what is the purpose of thought or action? Having deconstructed reason, truth, and the idea of the correspondence of thought to reality, and then set them aside—"reason," writes Foucault, "is the ultimate language of madness"⁴—there is nothing to guide or constrain our thoughts and feelings. So we can do or say whatever we feel like. Deconstruction, Stanley Fish confesses

¹ Foucault 1988, 11.

² Foucault, in May 1993, 2.

³ Rorty 1989, 7-8.

⁴ Foucault 1965, 95.

happily, “relieves me of the obligation to be right ... and demands only that I be interesting.”⁵

Many postmodernists, though, are less often in the mood for aesthetic play than for political activism. Many deconstruct reason, truth, and reality because they believe that in the name of reason, truth, and reality Western civilization has wrought dominance, oppression, and destruction. “Reason and power are one and the same,” Jean-François Lyotard states. Both lead to and are synonymous with “prisons, prohibitions, selection process, the public good.”⁶

Postmodernism then becomes an activist strategy against the coalition of reason and power. Postmodernism, Frank Lentricchia explains, “seeks not to find the foundation and the conditions of truth but to exercise power for the purpose of social change.” The task of postmodern professors is to help students “spot, confront, and work against the political horrors of one’s time”⁷

Those horrors, according to postmodernism, are most prominent in the West, Western civilization being where reason and power have been the most developed. But the pain of those horrors is neither inflicted nor suffered equally. Males, whites, and the rich have their hands on the whip of power, and they use it cruelly at the expense of women, racial minorities, and the poor.

The conflict between men and women is brutal. “The normal fuck,” writes Andrea Dworkin, “by a normal man is taken to be an act of invasion and ownership undertaken in a mode of predation.” This special insight into the sexual psychology of males is matched and confirmed by the sexual experience of women:

Women have been chattels to men as wives, as prostitutes, as sexual and reproductive servants. Being owned and being fucked are or have been virtually synonymous

⁵ Fish 1982, 180.

⁶ Lyotard, in Friedrich 1999, 46.

⁷ Lentricchia 1983, 12.

experiences in the lives of women. He owns you; he fucks you. The fucking conveys the quality of ownership: he owns you inside out.⁸

Dworkin and her colleague, Catharine MacKinnon, then call for the censorship of pornography on postmodern grounds. Our social reality is constructed by the language we use, and pornography is a form of language, one that constructs a violent and domineering reality for women to submit to. Pornography, therefore, is not free speech but political oppression.⁹

The violence is also experienced by the poor at the hands of the rich and by the struggling nations at the hands of the capitalist nations. For a striking example, Lyotard asks us to consider the American attack on Iraq in the 1990s. Despite American propaganda, Lyotard writes, the fact is that Saddam Hussein is a victim and a spokesman for victims of American imperialism the world over.

Saddam Hussein is a product of Western departments of state and big companies, just as Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco were born of the 'peace' imposed on their countries by the victors of the Great War. Saddam is such a product in an even more flagrant and cynical way. But the Iraqi dictatorship proceeds, as do the others, from the transfer of aporias [insoluble problems] in the capitalist system to vanquished, less developed, or simply less resistant countries.¹⁰

Yet the oppressed status of women, the poor, racial minorities, and others is almost always veiled in the capitalist nations. Rhetoric about trying to put the sins of the past behind us, about progress and democracy, about freedom and equality before the law—all such self-serving rhetoric serves only to mask the brutality of

⁸ Dworkin 1987, 63, 66.

⁹ MacKinnon 1993, 22.

¹⁰ Lyotard 1997, 74-75.

capitalist civilization. Rarely do we catch an honest glimpse of its underlying essence. For that glimpse, Foucault tells us, we should look to prison.

Prison is the only place where power is manifested in its naked state, in its most excessive form, and where it is justified as moral force. ... What is fascinating about prisons is that, for once, power doesn't hide or mask itself; it reveals itself as tyranny pursued into the tiniest details; it is cynical and at the same time pure and entirely 'justified,' because its practice can be totally formulated within the framework of morality. Its brutal tyranny consequently appears as the serene domination of Good over Evil, of order over disorder.¹¹

Finally, for the inspirational and philosophical source of postmodernism, for that which connects abstract and technical issues in linguistics and epistemology to political activism, Jacques Derrida identifies the philosophy of Marxism:

deconstruction never had meaning or interest, at least in my eyes, than as a radicalization, that is to say, also *within the tradition* of a certain Marxism in a certain *spirit of Marxism*.¹²

Modern and postmodern

Any intellectual movement is defined by its fundamental philosophical premises. Those premises state what it takes to be real, what it is to be human, what is valuable, and how knowledge

¹¹ Foucault 1977b, 210.

¹² Derrida 1995; see also Lilla 1998, 40. Foucault too casts his analysis in Marxist terms: "I label political everything that has to do with class struggle, and social everything that derives from and is a consequence of the class struggle, expressed in human relationships and in institutions" (1989, 104).

is acquired. That is, any intellectual movement has a metaphysics, a conception of human nature and values, and an epistemology.

Postmodernism often bills itself as anti-philosophical, by which it means that it rejects many traditional philosophical alternatives. Yet any statement or activity, including the action of writing a postmodern account of anything, presupposes at least an implicit conception of reality and values. And so despite its official distaste for some versions of the abstract, the universal, the fixed, and the precise, postmodernism offers a consistent framework of premises within which to situate our thoughts and actions.

Abstracting from the above quotations yields the following. *Metaphysically*, postmodernism is anti-realist, holding that it is impossible to speak meaningfully about an independently existing reality. Postmodernism substitutes instead a social-linguistic, constructionist account of reality. *Epistemologically*, having rejected the notion of an independently existing reality, postmodernism denies that reason or any other method is a means of acquiring objective knowledge of that reality. Having substituted social-linguistic constructs for that reality, postmodernism emphasizes the subjectivity, conventionality, and incommensurability of those constructions. Postmodern accounts of *human nature* are consistently collectivist, holding that individuals' identities are constructed largely by the social-linguistic groups that they are a part of, those groups varying radically across the dimensions of sex, race, ethnicity, and wealth. Postmodern accounts of human nature also consistently emphasize relations of conflict between those groups; and given the de-emphasized or eliminated role of reason, postmodern accounts hold that those conflicts are resolved primarily by the use of force, whether masked or naked; the use of force in turn leads to relations of dominance, submission, and oppression. Finally, postmodern themes in *ethics and politics* are characterized by an identification with and sympathy for the groups perceived to

be oppressed in the conflicts, and a willingness to enter the fray on their behalf.

The term “post-modern” situates the movement historically and philosophically against modernism. Thus understanding what the movement sees itself as rejecting and moving beyond will be helpful in formulating a definition of postmodernism. The modern world has existed for several centuries, and after several centuries we have good sense of what modernism is.

Modernism and the Enlightenment

In philosophy, modernism’s essentials are located in the formative figures of Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and René Descartes (1596-1650), for their influence upon epistemology, and more comprehensively in John Locke (1632-1704), for his influence upon all aspects of philosophy.

Bacon, Descartes, and Locke are modern because of their philosophical naturalism, their profound confidence in reason, and, especially in the case of Locke, their individualism. Modern thinkers start from nature—instead of starting with some form of the supernatural, which had been the characteristic starting point of pre-modern, Medieval philosophy. Modern thinkers stress that perception and reason are the human means of knowing nature—in contrast to the pre-modern reliance upon tradition, faith, and mysticism. Modern thinkers stress human autonomy and the human capacity for forming one’s own character—in contrast to the pre-modern emphasis upon dependence and original sin. Modern thinkers emphasize the individual, seeing the individual as the unit of reality, holding that the individual’s mind is sovereign, and that the individual is the unit of value—in contrast to the pre-modernist,

feudal subordination of the individual to higher political, social, or religious realities and authorities.¹³

Chart 1.1: Defining Pre-modernism and Modernism

	Pre-modernism	Modernism
<i>Metaphysics</i>	Realism: Super-naturalism	Realism: Naturalism
<i>Epistemology</i>	Mysticism and/or faith	Objectivism: Experience and reason
<i>Human Nature</i>	Original Sin; subject to God's will	<i>Tabula rasa</i> and autonomy
<i>Ethics</i>	Collectivism: altruism	Individualism
<i>Politics and Economics</i>	Feudalism	Liberal capitalism
<i>When and Where</i>	Medieval	The Enlightenment; twentieth-century sciences, business, technical fields

¹³ "Pre-modernism," as here used, excludes the classical Greek and Roman traditions and takes as its referent the dominant intellectual framework from roughly 400 CE to 1300 CE. Augustinian Christianity was pre-modernism's intellectual center of gravity. In the later medieval era, Thomism was an attempt to marry Christianity with a naturalistic Aristotelian philosophy. Accordingly, Thomistic philosophy undermined the pre-modern synthesis and helped open the door to the Renaissance and modernity.

On the use of "modernism" here, see also White (1991, 2-3) for a similar linking of reason, individualism, liberalism, capitalism, and progress as constituting the heart of the modern project.

Modern philosophy came to maturity in the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment *philosophes* quite rightly saw themselves as radical. The pre-modern Medieval worldview and the modern Enlightenment worldview were coherent, comprehensive—and entirely opposed—accounts of reality and the place of human beings within it. Medievalism had dominated the West for 1000 years, from roughly 400 CE to 1400 CE. In a centuries-long transition period, the thinkers of the Renaissance, with some unintended help from the major Reformation figures, undermined the Medieval worldview and paved the way for the revolutionaries of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By the eighteenth century, the pre-modern philosophy of Medieval era had been routed intellectually, and the *philosophes* were moving quickly to transform society on the basis of the new, modern philosophy.

The modern philosophers disagreed among themselves about many issues, but their core agreements outweighed the disagreements. Descartes's account of reason, for example, is rationalist while Bacon's and Locke's are empiricist, thus placing them at the heads of competing schools. But what is fundamental to all three is the central status of reason as objective and competent—in contrast to the faith, mysticism, and intellectual authoritarianism of earlier ages. Once reason is given pride of place, the entire Enlightenment project follows.

If one emphasizes that reason is a faculty of the individual, then individualism becomes a key theme in ethics. Locke's *A Letter concerning Toleration* (1689) and *Two Treatises of Government* (1690) are landmark texts in the modern history of individualism. Both link the human capacity for reason to ethical individualism and its social consequences: the prohibition of force against another's independent judgment or action, individual rights, political equality, limiting the power of government, and religious toleration.

If one emphasizes that reason is the faculty of understanding nature, then that epistemology systematically applied yields

science. Enlightenment thinkers laid the foundations of all the major branches of science. In mathematics, Isaac Newton and Gottfried Leibniz independently developed the calculus, Newton developing his version in 1666 and Leibniz publishing his in 1675. The most monumental publication in the history of modern physics, Newton's *Principia Mathematica*, appeared in 1687. A century of unprecedented investigation and achievement led to the production of Carolus Linnaeus's *Systema naturae* in 1735 and *Philosophia Botanica* in 1751, jointly presenting a comprehensive biological taxonomy, and to the production of Antoine Lavoisier's *Traité élémentaire de chimie* (Treatise on Chemical Elements) in 1789, the landmark text in the foundations of chemistry.

Individualism and science are thus consequences of an epistemology of reason. Both applied systematically have enormous consequences.

Individualism applied to politics yields liberal democracy. Liberalism is the principle of individual freedom, and democracy is the principle of decentralizing political power to individuals. As individualism rose in the modern world, feudalism declined. England's liberal revolution in 1688 began the trend. Modern political principles spread to America and France in the eighteenth century, leading to liberal revolutions there in 1776 and 1789. The weakening and overthrow of the feudal regimes then made possible the practical extension of liberal individualist ideas to all human beings. Racism and sexism are obvious affronts to individualism and so had been increasingly on the defensive as the eighteenth century progressed. For the first time ever in history, societies were formed for the elimination of slavery—in America in 1784, in England in 1787, and a year later in France; and 1791 and 1792 saw the publication of Olympe de Gouges's *Declaration of the Rights of Women* and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the*

Rights of Women, landmarks in the push for women's liberty and equality.¹⁴

Individualism applied to economics yields free markets and capitalism. Capitalist economics is based on the principle that individuals should be left free to make their own decisions about production, consumption, and trade. As individualism rose in the eighteenth century, feudal and mercantilist arguments and institutions declined. With the development of free markets came a theoretical grasp of the productive impact of the division of labor and specialization and of the retarding impact of protectionism and other restrictive regulations. Capturing and extending those insights, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776, is the landmark text in the history of modern economics. Theory and practice developed in tandem, and as markets became freer and more international the amount of wealth available increased dramatically. For example, N. F. R. Crafts's estimates of British average annual income, accepted by both pro- and anti-capitalist historians, show a historically unprecedented rise, from \$333 in 1700 to \$399 in 1760, to \$427 in 1800, to \$498 in 1830, and then a big jump to \$804 in 1860.¹⁵

Science applied systematically to material production yields engineering and technology. The new culture of reasoning, experimenting, entrepreneurship, and the free exchange of ideas and wealth meant that by the mid-1700s scientists and engineers were discovering knowledge and creating technologies on a historically unprecedented scale. The outstanding consequence of this was the Industrial Revolution, which was metaphorically picking up steam by 1750s, and literally picking up steam with the

¹⁴ The application of reason and individualism to religion led to a decline of faith, mysticism, and superstition. As a result, the religious wars finally cooled off until, for example, after the 1780s no more witches were burned in Europe (Kors and Peters 1972, 15).

¹⁵ Measured in 1970 U.S. dollars; Nardinelli, 1993.

success of James Watt's engine after 1769. Thomas Arkwright's water-frame (1769), James Hargreaves's spinning-jenny (c. 1769), and Samuel Crompton's mule (1779) all revolutionized spinning and weaving. Between 1760-80, for example, British consumption of raw cotton went up 540 percent, from 1.2 to 6.5 million pounds. The rich stuck to their hand-made goods for awhile, so the first things to be mass-produced in the new factories were cheap goods for the masses: soap, cotton clothes and linens, shoes, Wedgwood china, iron pots, and so on.

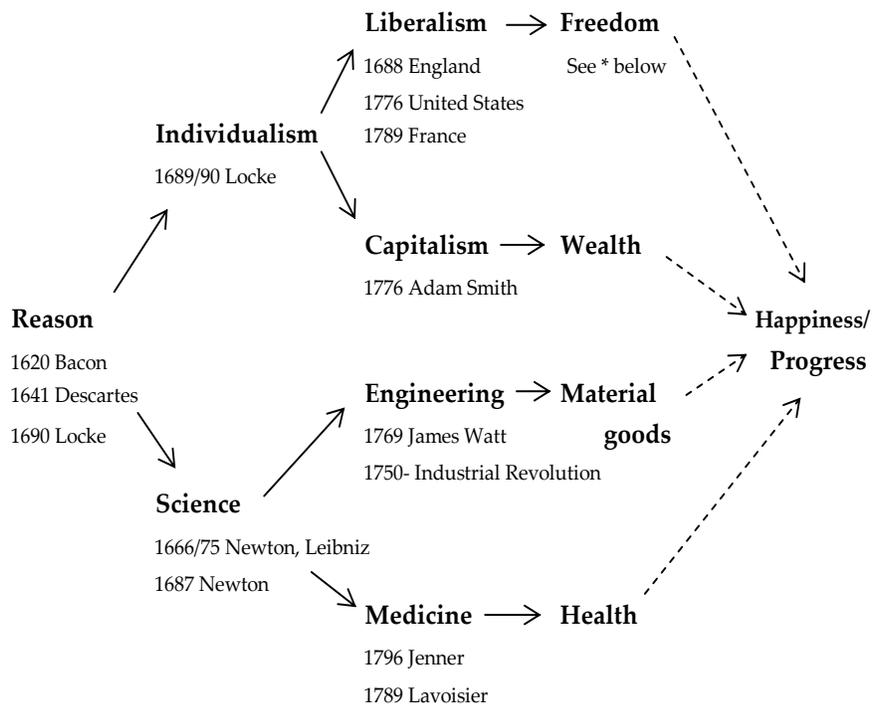
Science applied to the understanding of human beings yields medicine. The new approaches to understanding the human being as a naturalistic organism drew upon new studies, begun in the Renaissance, of human physiology and anatomy. Supernaturalistic and other pre-modern accounts of human ailments were swept aside as, by the second half of the eighteenth century, medicine put itself increasingly on a scientific footing. The outstanding consequence was that, combined with the rise in wealth, modern medicine increased human longevity dramatically. Edward Jenner's discovery of the smallpox vaccine in 1796, for example, both provided a protection against a major killer of the eighteenth century and established the science of immunization. Advances in obstetrics both established it as a separate branch of medicine and, more strikingly, contributed to the significant decline of infant mortality rates. In London, for example, the death rate for children before the age of five fell from 74.5 percent in 1730-49 to 31.8 percent in 1810-29.¹⁶

Modern philosophy matured in the 1700s until the dominant set of views of the era were naturalism, reason and science, *tabula rasa*, individualism, and liberalism. The Enlightenment was both the dominance of those ideas in intellectual circles and their translation into practice. As a result, individuals were becoming

¹⁶ Hessen 1962, 14; see also Nardinelli 1990, 76-79.

freer, wealthier, living longer, and enjoying more material comfort than at any point before in history.

Chart 1.2: The Enlightenment Vision



* 1764 Beccaria, *On Crimes and Punishment*

1780s: Last witches burned legally in Europe

1784 American Society for Abolition of Slavery

1787 British Society for Abolition of Slave Trade

1788 French Société des Amis des Noirs

1792 Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Women*

Postmodernism versus the Enlightenment

Postmodernism rejects the entire Enlightenment project. It holds that the modernist premises of the Enlightenment were untenable from the beginning and that their cultural manifestations have now reached their nadir. While the modern world continues to speak of reason, freedom, and progress, its pathologies tell another story. The postmodern critique of those pathologies is offered as the death knell of modernism: “The deepest strata of Western culture” have been exposed, Foucault argues, and are “once more stirring under our feet.”¹⁷ Accordingly, states Rorty, the postmodern task is to figure out what to do “now that both the Age of Faith and the Enlightenment seem beyond recovery.”¹⁸

Postmodernism rejects the Enlightenment project in the most fundamental way possible—by attacking its essential philosophical themes. Postmodernism rejects the reason and the individualism that the entire Enlightenment world depends upon. And so it ends up attacking all of the consequences of the Enlightenment philosophy, from capitalism and liberal forms of government to science and technology.

Postmodernism’s essentials are the opposite of modernism’s. Instead of natural reality—anti-realism. Instead of experience and reason—linguistic social subjectivism. Instead of individual identity and autonomy—various race, sex, and class group-isms. Instead of human interests as fundamentally harmonious and tending toward mutually-beneficial interaction—conflict and oppression. Instead of valuing individualism in values, markets, and politics—calls for communalism, solidarity, and egalitarian restraints. Instead of

¹⁷ Foucault 1966/1973, xxiv.

¹⁸ Rorty 1982, 175. Also John Gray: “We live today amid the dim ruins of the Enlightenment project, which was the ruling project of the modern period” (1995, 145).

prizing the achievements of science and technology—suspicion tending toward outright hostility.

That comprehensive philosophical opposition informs the more specific postmodern themes in the various academic and cultural debates.

Chart 1.3: Defining Pre-modernism, Modernism, and Postmodernism

	Pre-modernism	Modernism	Postmodernism
<i>Meta-physics</i>	Realism: Supernaturalism	Realism: Naturalism	Anti-realism
<i>Epistemology</i>	Mysticism and/or faith	Objectivism: Experience and reason	Social subjectivism
<i>Human Nature</i>	Original Sin; Subject to God's will	<i>Tabula rasa</i> and autonomy	Social construction and conflict
<i>Ethics</i>	Collectivism: altruism	Individualism	Collectivism: egalitarianism
<i>Politics & Economics</i>	Feudalism	Liberal capitalism	Socialism
<i>When and Where</i>	Medieval	The Enlightenment; 20 th -century sciences, business, and technical fields	Late twentieth century humanities and related professions

Postmodern academic themes

Postmodern literary criticism rejects the notion that literary texts have objective meanings and true interpretations. All such claims to objectivity and truth can be deconstructed. In one version of deconstruction, represented by those who agree with the quotation from Fish on page 2 above, literary criticism becomes a form of subjective play in which the reader pours subjective associations into the text. In another version, objectivity is replaced by the view that an author's race, sex, or other group membership most deeply shapes the author's views and feelings. The task of the literary critic, accordingly, is to deconstruct the text to reveal the author's race, sex, or class interests. Authors and characters who least embody the correct attitudes are naturally subject to the greatest amount of deconstruction. Nathaniel Hawthorne, for example, in *The Scarlet Letter* seems at least ambivalent about Hester Prynne's moral status—and this ambivalence reveals that he has sold out to an authoritarian, conformist, and repressive masculine religious establishment.¹⁹ Or: Herman Melville in *Moby Dick* may have thought that he was exploring universal themes of personal and social ambition, man and nature—but what Captain Ahab really represents is the exploitative authoritarianism of imperialistic patriarchalism and the insane drive of technology to conquer nature.²⁰

In law, versions of Legal Pragmatism and Critical Legal Theory embody the new wave. For the pragmatist version of post-modernism, any abstract and universal theory of the law is to be distrusted. Theories are worthwhile only to the extent that they provide the lawyer or judge with useful verbal tools.²¹ Standards

¹⁹ Hoffman 1990,14-15, 28.

²⁰ Schultz 1988, 52, 55-57.

²¹ Luban 1998, 275; Grey 1998.

for usefulness, however, are subjective and variable, so the legal world becomes a postmodernist battleground. As there are no universally valid legal principles of justice, arguments become rhetorical battles of wills. The Critical Legal Theorists represent the race, class, and sex version of legal postmodernism. According to the Critics, legal constitutions and precedents are essentially indeterminate, and the so-called objectivity and neutrality of legal reasoning are frauds. All decisions are inherently subjective and driven by preference and politics. The law is a weapon to be used in the social arena of subjective conflict, an arena driven by competing wills and the coercive assertion of one group's interests over those of other groups. In the West, for too long the law has been a cover for the assertion of white male interests. The only antidote to that poison is the equally forceful assertion of the subjective interests of historically oppressed groups. Stanley Fish marries the pragmatist and Crit approaches in arguing that if lawyers and judges come to think of themselves as "supplementers" rather than "textualists," they "will thereby be marginally more free than they otherwise would be to infuse into constitutional law their current interpretations of our society's values."²²

In education, postmodernism rejects the notion that the purpose of education is primarily to train a child's cognitive capacity for reason in order to produce an adult capable of functioning independently in the world. That view of education is replaced with the view that education is to take an essentially indeterminate being and give it a social identity.²³ Education's method of molding is linguistic, and so the language to be used is that which will create a human being sensitive to its racial, sexual, and class identity. Our current social context, however, is characterized by oppression that benefits whites, males, and the rich at the expense of everyone else. That oppression in turn leads

²² Fish quoting Thomas Grey (Fish 1985, 445).

²³ Golden 1996, 381-382.

to an educational system that reflects only or primarily the interests of those in positions of power. To counteract that bias, educational practice must be recast totally. Postmodern education should emphasize works not in the canon; it should focus on the achievements of non-whites, females, and the poor; it should highlight the historical crimes of whites, males, and the rich; and it should teach students that science's method has no better claim to yielding truth than any other method and, accordingly, that students should be equally receptive to alternative ways of knowing.²⁴

Postmodern cultural themes

These broad academic themes in turn inform our more specific cultural debates.

- Whether the Western canon of great books is a distillation of the best of the West and reflective of a multi-faceted debate—or whether it is ideologically narrow, exclusive, and intolerant.
- Whether Christopher Columbus was a modern hero, bringing two worlds together to their mutual benefit—or whether he was an insensitive, smugly superior point man for European imperialism, bringing armed force that rammed European religion and values down indigenous cultures' throats.
- Whether the United States of America is progressive on liberty, equalities, and opportunities for everyone—or whether it is sexist, racist, and class-bound, e.g., using its mass market pornography and glass ceilings to keep women in their place.
- Whether our ambivalence over affirmative action programs reflects a strong desire to be fair to all parties—or whether those programs are merely a cynical bone thrown to women and minorities until they seem to be helping, at which point there is a violent reaction by the *status quo*.

²⁴ Mohanty 1980, 185.

- Whether social conflicts should be defused by encouraging the principle that individuals should be judged according to their individual merits and not according to morally irrelevant features such as race or sex—or whether group identities should be affirmed and celebrated, and whether those who balk at doing so should be sent for mandatory sensitivity training.
- Whether life in the West, and especially America, is improving, with average longevity and wealth increasing in each generation—or whether Amerika has abandoned its urban underclass and fostered a bland consumerist culture of shopping malls and suburban sprawl.
- Whether the liberal West is leading the rest of the world to a freer and more prosperous future—or whether its heavy-handed intrusiveness in foreign policy and its command of the international financial markets are exporting its McJobs to non-Western nations, locking them into the System and destroying their indigenous cultures.
- Whether science and technology are good for all, extending our knowledge of the universe and making the world healthier, cleaner, and more productive—or whether science betrays its elitism, sexism, and destructiveness by making the speed of light the fastest phenomenon, thereby unfairly privileging it over other speeds—by having chosen the phallic symbol i to represent the square root of negative one—by asserting its desire to “conquer” nature and “penetrate” her secrets—and, having done so, by having its technology consummate the rape by building bigger and longer missiles to blow things up.
- And whether, in general, liberalism, free markets, technology, and cosmopolitanism are social achievements that can be enjoyed by all cultures—or whether non-Western cultures, since they live simply and in harmony with nature, are superior—and whether the West is arrogantly blind to that fact, being elitist and imperialistic,

imposing its capitalism, its science and technology, and its ideology upon other cultures and an increasingly fragile ecosystem.

Why postmodernism?

What makes all of these debates postmodern is not that the skirmishes are vigorous and heated—but that the terms of the debate have shifted.

Modern debates were over truth and reality, reason and experience, liberty and equality, justice and peace, beauty and progress. In the postmodern framework, those concepts always appear in quotation marks. Our most strident voices tell us that “Truth” is a myth. “Reason” is a white male Eurocentric construct. “Equality” is a mask for oppressions. “Peace” and “Progress” are met with cynical and weary reminders of power—or explicit *ad hominem* attacks.

Postmodern debates thus display a paradoxical nature. Across the board, we hear, on the one hand, abstract themes of relativism and egalitarianism. Those themes come in both epistemological and ethical forms. Objectivity is a myth; there is no Truth, no Right Way to read nature or a text. All interpretations are equally valid. Values are socially subjective products. Culturally, therefore, no group’s values have special standing. All ways of life from Afghani to Zulu are legitimate.

Coexisting with these relativistic and egalitarian themes, we hear, on the other hand, deep chords of cynicism. Principles of civility and procedural justice simply serve as masks for hypocrisy and oppression born of asymmetrical power relations, masks that must be ripped off by crude verbal and physical weapons: *ad hominem* argument, in-your-face shock tactics, and equally cynical power plays. Disagreements are met—not with argument, the benefit of the doubt, and the expectation that reason can prevail—but with assertion, animosity, and a willingness to resort to force.

Postmodernism, therefore, is a comprehensive philosophical and cultural movement. It identifies its target—modernism and its realization in the Enlightenment and its legacy—and it mounts powerful arguments against all of the essential elements of modernism.

The existence of any prominent cultural movement raises questions of intellectual history. In the case of postmodernism, independent developments in many intellectual areas—primarily in epistemology and politics, but also in metaphysics, the physical sciences, and our understanding of human nature and values—came together in the middle part of the twentieth century. Understanding the development of those independent strands and how and why they came to be woven together is essential to understanding postmodernism.

Why is it, for example, that skeptical and relativistic arguments have the cultural power that they now do? Why do they have that power in the humanities but not in the sciences? Why have themes of exhaustion, nihilism, and cynicism come to have the cultural dominance they do? And how can those intellectual themes coexist with a broader culture that is richer, freer, and more vigorous than any culture at any other point in history? Why is it that the leading postmodern thinkers are Left in their politics—in most cases, far Left? And why is it that that prominent segment of the Left—the same Left that traditionally defended its positions on the modernist grounds of reason, science, fairness for all, and optimism—is now voicing themes of anti-reason, anti-science, all's-fair-in-love-and-war, and cynicism?

The Enlightenment re-shaped the entire world, and postmodernism hopes to do the same. Forming such an ambition and developing the arguments capable of mobilizing a movement to realize that ambition is the work of many individuals over several generations. Contemporary second-tier postmodernists, when looking for philosophical support, cite Rorty, Foucault, Lyotard, and

Derrida. Those figures in turn, when looking for heavy-duty philosophical support, cite Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Karl Marx—the modern world’s most trenchant critics and its most prophetic voices about the new direction. Those figures in turn cite Georg Hegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, Immanuel Kant, and to a lesser extent David Hume. The roots and initial impetus of postmodernism thus run deep. The battle between modernism and the philosophies that led to postmodernism was joined at the height of the Enlightenment. Knowing the history of that battle is essential to understanding postmodernism.

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