

Chapter Six

Postmodern Strategy

Connecting epistemology to politics

We are now in a position to address the question posed at the end of Chapter One: Why has a leading segment of the political Left adopted skeptical and relativist epistemological strategies?

Language is the center of postmodern epistemology. Moderns and postmoderns differ not only about *content* when arguing particular issues in philosophy, literature, and law; they also differ in the *methods* by which they employ language. Epistemology drives those differences.

Epistemology asks two questions about language: What is language's connection to reality, and what is its connection to action? Epistemological questions about language are a subset of epistemological questions about consciousness in general: What is consciousness's connection to reality, and what is its connection to action? Moderns and postmoderns have radically different answers to those questions.

For the modern realists, consciousness is both *cognitive* and *functional*, and those two traits are integrated. The primary purpose of consciousness is to be aware of reality. The complementary purpose of consciousness is to use its awareness of reality as a guide to acting in that reality.

For the postmodern antirealists, by contrast, consciousness is *functional*—but it is *not* cognitive, so its functionality has nothing to do with cognition. Two key concepts in the postmodern lexicon, “unmasking” and “rhetoric,” illustrate the significance of the differences.

Unmasking and rhetoric

To the modernist, the “mask” metaphor is a recognition of the fact that words are not always to be taken literally or as directly stating a fact—that people can use language elliptically, metaphorically, or to state falsehoods, that language can be textured with layers of meaning, and that it can be used to cover hypocrisies or to rationalize. Accordingly, unmasking means interpreting or investigating to get to a literal meaning or fact of the matter. The process of unmasking is cognitive, guided by objective standards, with the purpose of coming to an awareness of reality.

For the postmodernist, by contrast, interpretation and investigation never terminate with reality. Language connects only with more language, never with a non-linguistic reality. In Jacques Derrida’s words, “[t]he fact of language is probably the only fact ultimately to resist all parenthization.”¹ That is to say, we cannot get outside of language. Language is an “internal,” self-referential system, and there is no way to get “external” to it—although even to speak of “internal” and “external” is also meaningless on postmodern grounds. There is no non-linguistic standard to which to relate language, so there can be no standard by which to

¹ Derrida 1978, 37.

distinguish between the literal and the metaphorical, the true and the false. Deconstruction is therefore in principle an unending process. Unmasking does not even terminate in "subjective" beliefs and interests, for "subjective" contrasts to "objective," and that too is a distinction that postmodernism denies. A "subject's beliefs and interests" are themselves socio-linguistic constructions, so unmasking one piece of language to reveal an underlying subjective interest is only to reveal more language. And that language in turn can be unmasked to reveal more language, and so on. Language is masks all the way down.

At any given time, however, a subject is a particular construction with a particular set of beliefs and interests, and the subject uses language to express and further those beliefs and interests. Language is thus functional, and this brings us to rhetoric.

For the modernist, the functionality of language is complementary to its being cognitive. An individual observes reality perceptually, forms conceptual beliefs about reality on the basis of those perceptions, and then acts in reality on the basis of those perceptual and conceptual cognitive states. Some of those actions in the world are social interactions, and in some of those social interactions language assumes a communicatory function. In communicating with each other, individuals narrate, argue, or otherwise attempt to pass on their cognitive beliefs about the world. Rhetoric, then, is an aspect of language's communicatory function, referring to those methods of using language that aid in the effectiveness of cognition during linguistic communication.

For the postmodernist, language cannot be cognitive because it does not connect to reality, whether to an external nature or an underlying self. Language is not about being aware of the world, or about distinguishing the true from the false, or even about argument in the traditional sense of validity, soundness, and probability. Accordingly, postmodernism recasts the nature of rhetoric: Rhetoric is persuasion in the absence of cognition.

Richard Rorty makes this point clear in his essay, "The Contingency of Language." The failure of the realist position, Rorty argues, has shown that "the world does not tell us what language games to play" and that "human languages are human creations."² The purpose of language is therefore not to argue in an attempt to prove or disprove anything. Accordingly, Rorty concludes, that is not what he is doing when he uses language to try to persuade us of his version of "solidarity."

Conforming to my own precepts, I am not going to offer arguments against the vocabulary I want to replace. Instead, I am going to try to make the vocabulary I favor look attractive by showing how it may be used to describe a variety of topics.³

The language here is of "attractiveness" in the absence of cognition, truth, or argument.

By temperament and in the content of his politics, Rorty is the least extreme of the leading postmodernists. This is apparent in the kind of language he uses in his political discourse. Language is a tool of social interaction, and one's model of social interaction dictates what kind of tool language is used as. Rorty sees a great deal of pain and suffering in the world and much conflict between groups, so language is to him primarily a tool of conflict resolution. To that end, his language pushes "empathy," "sensitivity," and "toleration"—although he also suggests that those virtues may apply only within the range of our "ethnocentric" predicament: "we must, in practice, privilege our own group," he writes, which implies that "there are lots of views which we simply cannot take seriously."⁴

Most other postmodernists, however, see the conflicts between groups as more brutal and our prospects for empathy as more

² Rorty 1989, 6, 4-5.

³ Rorty 1989, 9.

⁴ Rorty 1991, 29.

severely limited than does Rorty. Using language as a tool of conflict *resolution* is therefore not on their horizon. In a conflict that cannot reach peaceful resolution, the kind of tool that one wants is a *weapon*. And so given the conflict models of social relations that dominate postmodern discourse, it makes perfect sense that to most postmodernists language is primarily a weapon.

This explains the harsh nature of much postmodern rhetoric. The regular deployments of *ad hominem*, the setting up of straw men, and the regular attempts to silence opposing voices are all logical consequences of the postmodern epistemology of language. Stanley Fish, as noted in Chapter Four, calls all opponents of racial preferences bigots and lumps them in with the Ku Klux Klan.⁵ Andrea Dworkin calls all heterosexual males rapists⁶ and repeatedly labels “Amerika” a fascist state.⁷ With such rhetoric, truth or falsity is not the issue: what matters primarily is the language’s *effectiveness*.

If we now add to the postmodern epistemology of language the far Left politics of the leading postmodernists and their firsthand awareness of the crises of socialist thought and practice, then the verbal weaponry has to become explosive.

When theory clashes with fact

In the past two centuries, many strategies have been pursued by socialists the world over. Socialists have tried waiting for the masses to achieve socialism from the bottom up, and they have tried imposing socialism from the top down. They have tried to achieve it by evolution and by revolution. They have tried versions of socialism that emphasize industrialization, and they have tried those that are agrarian. They have waited for capitalism to collapse

⁵ Fish 1994, 68-69.

⁶ Dworkin 1987, 123, 126.

⁷ Dworkin 1987, 123, 126, 47.

by itself, and when that did not happen they have tried to destroy capitalism by peaceful means. And when that did not work some tried to destroy it by terrorism.

But capitalism continues to do well and socialism has been a disaster. In modern times there have been over two centuries of socialist theory and practice, and the preponderance of logic and evidence has gone against socialism.

There is accordingly a choice about what lesson to learn from history.

If one is interested in *truth*, then one's *rational* response to a failing theory is as follows:

- One breaks the theory down to its constituent premises.
- One questions its premises vigorously and checks the logic that integrates them.
- One seeks out alternatives to the most questionable premises.
- One accepts moral responsibility for any bad consequences of putting the false theory into practice.

This is not what we find in postmodern reflections on contemporary politics. Truth and rationality are subjected to attack, and the prevailing attitude about moral responsibility is again best stated by Rorty: "I think that a good Left is a party that always thinks about the future and doesn't care much about our past sins."⁸

Kierkegaardian postmodernism

In Chapter Four, I sketched one postmodern response to the problems of theory and evidence for socialism. For an intelligent, informed socialist confronted with the data of history, a crisis of belief has to occur. Socialism is to many a powerful vision of the beautiful society, one that envisages an ideal social world that will

⁸ Rorty 1998.

transcend all the ills of our current one. Any such deeply held vision comes to form part of the very identity of the believer, and any threat to the vision has to be experienced as a threat to the believer.

From the historical experience of other visions that have run into crises of theory and evidence, we know that there can be a powerful temptation to block out theoretical and evidentiary problems and simply to will oneself into continuing to believe. Religion, for example, has provided many such instances. "Ten thousand difficulties," wrote Cardinal Newman, "do not make one doubt."⁹ Fyodor Dostoevsky made the point more starkly, in a letter to a woman benefactor: "If anyone had written to me that the truth was outside of Christ, I would rather remain with Christ than with the truth."¹⁰ We also know from historical experience that sophisticated epistemological strategies can be developed precisely for the purpose of attacking the reason and logic that have caused problems for the vision. Such were part of the explicit motivations of Kant's first *Critique*, Schleiermacher's *On Religion*, and Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*.

Why not for the far Left? The modern histories of religion and socialism exhibit striking parallels in development.

- Both religion and socialism started with a comprehensive vision that they believed to be true but not based on reason (various prophets; Rousseau).
- Both visions were then challenged by visions based on rational epistemologies (early naturalist critics of religion; early liberal critics of socialism).

⁹ Newman, *Position of My Mind Since 1845*.

¹⁰ With his unparalleled capacity for confession, Rousseau generalized this point to all philosophers: "Each knows well that his system is no better founded than the others. But he maintains it because it is his. There is not a single one of them who, if he came to know the true and the false, would not prefer the lie he has found to the truth discovered by another" (1762a, 268-269).

- Both religion and socialism responded by saying that they could satisfy the criteria of reason (natural theology; scientific socialism).
- Both religion and socialism then ran into serious problems of logic and evidence (Hume's attacks on natural theology; Mises's and Hayek's attacks on socialist calculation).
- Both then responded in turn by attacking reality and reason (Kant and Kierkegaard; postmodernists).

By the end of the eighteenth century, religious thinkers had available to them Kant's sophisticated epistemology. Kant told them that reason was cut off from reality, and so many abandoned natural theology and gratefully used his epistemology to defend religion. By the middle of the twentieth century, Left thinkers had available to them sophisticated theories of epistemology and language that told them that truth is impossible—that evidence is theory-laden—that empirical evidence never adds up to proof—that logical proof is merely theoretical—that reason is artificial and dehumanizing—and that one's feelings and passions are better guides than reason.

The prevailing skeptical and irrationalist epistemologies in academic philosophy thus provided the Left with a new strategy for responding to its crisis. *Any* attack on socialism in *any* form could be brushed aside, and the desire to believe in it reaffirmed. Those who adopted this strategy could always tell themselves that they were simply functioning as Kuhn said the scientists themselves function—by bracketing the anomalies, setting them aside, and then going with their feelings.

On this hypothesis, then, postmodernism is a symptom of the far Left's crisis of faith. Postmodernism is a result of using skeptical epistemology to justify the personal leap of faith necessary to continue believing in socialism.

On this hypothesis, the prevalence of skeptical and irrationalist epistemologies in the middle of the twentieth century alone is not a

sufficient explanation of postmodernism. A dead end of skepticism and irrationalism does not predict to what uses skepticism and irrationalism will be put. A desperate person or movement can appeal to those epistemologies as a defense mechanism, but who or what movement is desperate depends on other factors. In this case, socialism is the movement in trouble. But socialism's troubles alone are not a sufficient explanation either. Unless the epistemological groundwork is laid, any movement that appeals to skeptical and irrationalist arguments will simply be laughed out of court. Therefore, it is a combination of the two factors—widespread skepticism about reason and socialism's being in crisis—that is necessary to give rise to postmodernism.

Yet this Kierkegaardian explanation of postmodernism is incomplete as an account of postmodern strategy. For Left thinkers who are crushed by the failings of socialism, the Kierkegaardian option provides the justification needed for continuing to believe in socialism as a matter of personal faith. But for those who still want to carry on the battle against capitalism, the new epistemologies make other strategies possible.

Reversing Thrasymachus

So far my argument accounts for postmodernism's subjectivism and relativism, its Left-wing politics, and the need to connect the two.

If this explanation is correct, then postmodernism is what I call *Reverse Thrasymacheanism*, alluding to the sophist Thrasymachus of Plato's *Republic*. Some postmodernists see part of their project as rehabilitating the Sophists, and this makes perfect sense.

One could, after doing some philosophy, come to be a true believer in subjectivism and relativism. Accordingly, one could come to believe that reason is derivative, that will and desire rule, that society is a battle of competing wills, that words are merely

tools in the power struggle for dominance, and that all is fair in love and war.

That is the position the Sophists argued 2400 years ago. The only difference, then, between the Sophists and the postmodernists is whose side they are on. Thrasymachus was representative of the second and cruder generation of Sophists, marshalling subjectivist and relativistic arguments in support of the political claim that justice is the interest of the stronger. The postmodernists—coming after two millennia of Christianity and two centuries of socialist theory—simply reverse that claim: Subjectivism and relativism are true, except that the postmodernists are on the side of the weaker and historically-oppressed groups. Justice, contrary to Thrasymachus, is the interest of the weaker.¹¹

The connection to the Sophists moves postmodern strategy away from religious faith and toward *realpolitik*. The Sophists taught rhetoric not as a means of advancing truth and knowledge but as a means of winning debates in the rough-and-tumble world of day-to-day politics. Day-to-day politics is not a place where faithfully blinding oneself to the data leads to practical success. Rather it requires an openness to new realities and the flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances. Extending that flexibility to include not being concerned for truth or consistency in argument can and often has been seen as part of a strategy for achieving political success. Here it is useful to recall Lentricchia: Postmodern-

¹¹ Placing pain and suffering at the center of morality is a recurring theme among the leading postmodernists. Lyotard, expressing agreement with Foucault, states that one has to “bear witness” to the “dissonance,” especially that of others (Lyotard 1988, xiii, 140-141). Rorty believes that “solidarity” is achieved by the “imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people” (Rorty 1989).

ism “seeks not to find the foundation and the conditions of truth but to exercise power for the purpose of social change.”¹²

Using contradictory discourses as a political strategy

In postmodern discourse, truth is rejected explicitly and consistency can be a rare phenomenon. Consider the following pairs of claims.

- On the one hand, all truth is relative; on the other hand, postmodernism tells it like it really is.
- On the one hand, all cultures are equally deserving of respect; on the other, Western culture is uniquely destructive and bad.
- Values are subjective—but sexism and racism are really evil.
- Technology is bad and destructive—and it is unfair that some people have more technology than others.
- Tolerance is good and dominance is bad—but when postmodernists come to power, political correctness follows.

There is a common pattern here: Subjectivism and relativism in one breath, dogmatic absolutism in the next. Postmodernists are well aware of the contradictions—especially since their opponents relish pointing them out at every opportunity. And of course a postmodernist can respond dismissingly by citing Hegel—“Those are merely Aristotelian logical contradictions”—but it is one thing to *say* that and quite another to *sustain* Hegelian contradictions psychologically.

The pattern therefore raises the question of which side of the contradiction is deepest for postmodernism. Is it that postmodernists really are committed to relativism, but occasionally lapse into absolutism? Or are the absolutist commitments deepest and the relativism a rhetorical cover?

¹² Lentricchia 1983, 12.

Consider three more examples, this time of clashes between postmodernist theory and historical fact.

- Postmodernists say that the West is deeply racist, but they know very well that the West ended slavery for the first time ever, and that it is only in places where Western ideas have made inroads that racist ideas are on the defensive.
- They say that the West is deeply sexist, but they know very well that Western women were the first to get the vote, contractual rights, and the opportunities that most women in the world are still without.
- They say that Western capitalist countries are cruel to their poorer members, subjugating them and getting rich off them, but they know very well that the poor in the West are far richer than the poor anywhere else, both in terms of material assets and the opportunities to improve their condition.

In explaining the contradiction between the relativism and the absolutist politics, there are three possibilities.

1. The first possibility is that the relativism is primary and the absolutist politics are secondary. *Qua* philosophers, the postmodernists push relativism, but *qua* particular individuals they happen to believe a particular version of absolutist politics.
2. The second possibility is that the absolutist politics are primary, while the relativism is a rhetorical strategy that is used to advance that politics.
3. The third possibility is that both the relativism and the absolutism coexist in postmodernism, but the contradictions between them simply do not matter psychologically to those who hold them.

The first option can be ruled out as a possibility. Subjectivism and its consequent relativism cannot be primary to postmodernism because of the uniformity of the politics of postmodernism. If

subjectivity and relativism were primary, then postmodernists would be adopting political positions across the spectrum, and that simply is not happening. Postmodernism is therefore first a political movement, and a brand of politics that has only lately come to relativism.

Machiavellian postmodernism

So let us try the second option, that postmodernism is first about politics and only secondly about relativistic epistemology. Fredric Jameson's oft-quoted line—"everything is 'in the last analysis' political"¹³—should then be given a strongly Machiavellian twist as a statement of a willingness to use any weapon—rhetorical, epistemological, political—to achieve political ends. Then, strikingly, postmodernism turns out *not* to be relativistic at all. Relativism becomes part of a rhetorical political strategy, some Machiavellian *realpolitik* employed to throw the opposition off track.

On this hypothesis, postmodernists need not believe much of what they say. The word games and much of the use of anger and rage that are characteristic of much of their style can be a matter—not of using words to state things that they think are true—but rather of using words as weapons against an enemy that they still hope to destroy.

Here it is useful to recall Derrida: "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*."¹⁴

¹³ Jameson 1981, 20.

¹⁴ Derrida 1995; Lilla, 1998, 40. This interpretation fits also with Mark Lilla's assessment of the relationship between politics and philosophy among the post-World War II generation of French intellectuals: "The history of French philosophy in the three decades following the Second World War can be summed up in a phrase: politics dictated and philosophy wrote" (Lilla 2001, 161).

Machiavellian rhetorical discourses

Suppose that you are arguing about politics with a fellow student or professor. You cannot believe it, but you seem to be losing the debate. All of your argumentative gambits are blocked, and you keep getting backed into corners. Feeling trapped, you then find yourself saying, "Well, it's all just a matter of opinion; it's merely semantics."

What is the purpose in this context of appealing to opinion and semantic relativism? The purpose is to get your opponent off your back and to get some breathing space. If your opponent accepts that the debate is a matter of opinion or semantics, then your losing the argument does not matter: nobody is right or wrong. But if your opponent does *not* accept that everything is a matter of opinion, then his attention is diverted away from the subject matter at hand—namely, politics—and into epistemology. For now he has to show why everything is not merely semantics, and that will take him awhile. Meanwhile, you have successfully diverted him. And if it looks like he is doing a good job on the semantics argument, then you can throw in—"Well, what about perceptual illusions?"

In adopting this rhetorical strategy, do you really have to believe that everything is a matter of opinion or merely semantics? No, you do not. You can believe absolutely that you are right about the politics; and you can know that all you want to do is to use words to get the guy off your back in a way that makes it seem like you have not lost the argument.

This rhetorical strategy also works at the level of intellectual movements. Foucault has identified the strategy explicitly and clearly: "Discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy."¹⁵

¹⁵ Foucault 1978, 101-102.

Deconstruction as an educational strategy

Here is an example. Kate Ellis is a radical gender feminist. Ellis, as she writes in *Socialist Review*, believes that sexism is evil, that affirmative action is good, that capitalism and sexism go hand in hand, and that achieving equality between the sexes requires an overthrow of existing society. But she finds that she has a problem when she tries to teach these themes to her students. She finds that they think like liberal capitalists—they think in terms of equality of opportunity, in terms of simply removing artificial barriers and judging everyone by the same standards, and they think that by personal effort and ambition they can overcome most obstacles and achieve success in life.¹⁶ But this means that her students have bought into the whole liberal capitalist framework that Ellis thinks is dead wrong. So, Ellis writes, she will enlist deconstruction as a weapon against those old-fashioned Enlightenment beliefs.¹⁷

If she can first undermine her students' belief in the superiority of capitalist values and of the idea that people make or break themselves, then their core values will be de-stabilized.¹⁸ Pushing relativism, she finds, helps achieve this. And once their Enlightenment beliefs are hollowed out by relativistic arguments, she can fill the void with the correct Left political principles.¹⁹

¹⁶ Ellis 1989, 39.

¹⁷ Ellis 1989, 40, 42.

¹⁸ Ellis 1989, 42.

¹⁹ Ellis is thus a disciple of both John Dewey and Herbert Marcuse: education is a Deweyan process of "social reconstruction," but a reconstruction that requires first a Marcusean deconstruction. Dewey: "I believe that education is a regulation of the process of coming to share in the social consciousness; and that the adjustment of individual activity on the basis of social consciousness is the only sure method of social reconstruction" (Dewey 1897, 16). Marcuse: "Reason [in the Hegelian sense] signifies the 'absolute annihilation' of the common-sense world. For, as we have already said, the struggle against common sense is the beginning of speculative thinking, and the loss of everyday security is the origin of philosophy" (Marcuse 1954, 48).

A familiar analogy may help here. On this hypothesis, postmodernists are no more relativistic than creationists are in their battles against evolutionary theory. Postmodernists, wearing their multiculturalist garb and saying that all cultures are equal, are like those creationists who say that all they want is equal time for evolutionism and creationism. Creationists will sometimes argue that creationism and evolutionism are equally scientific, or equally religious, and that they should therefore be treated equally and given equal time. Do creationists really believe that? Is equal time all that they want? Of course not. Creationists are fundamentally opposed to evolution—they are convinced that it is wrong and evil, and if they were in power they would suppress it. However, as a short-term tactic, as long as they are on the losing side of the intellectual debate, they will push intellectual egalitarianism and argue that nobody really knows the absolute truth. The same strategy holds for the Machiavellian postmodernists—they say they want equal respect for all cultures, but what they really want in the long run is to suppress the liberal capitalist one.

The Machiavellian interpretation also explains the use that postmodernists sometimes make of science. Einstein's Relativity Theory, quantum mechanics, chaos mathematics, and Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem will all be cited regularly as proving that everything is relative, that nothing can be known, that everything is chaos. At best, in postmodernist writings, one will read dubious interpretations of the data, but more commonly the person involved does not have a clear idea of what the theorem in question is or how it is proved.

This is especially clear in the infamous case of physicist Alan Sokal and the far-Left journal *Social Text*. Sokal published an article in *Social Text* in which he argued that science had discredited the Enlightenment view of an objective, knowable reality, and that the latest results from quantum physics supported far Left politics.²⁰

²⁰ Sokal 1996.

Sokal announced simultaneously in *Lingua Franca* that the article was a parody of postmodern criticism of science. The shocked reaction of the editors and defenders of *Social Text* was not to argue that they thought the physics presented in the article is true or even a legitimate interpretation. Instead the editors were deeply embarrassed and at the same time suggested piously that it was Sokal who had violated the sacred bonds of academic honesty and integrity. It was clear, however, that the editors did not know much about the physics and that the article had been published because of the political mileage they could get out of it.²¹

The Machiavellian interpretation also explains why relativistic arguments are arrayed only against the Western great books canon. If one's deepest goals are political, one always has a major obstacle to deal with—the powerful books written by brilliant minds on the other side of the debate. In literature, there is a huge body of novels, plays, epic poems, and not much of it supports socialism. Much of it presents compelling analyses of the human condition from opposed perspectives. In American law, there is the Constitution and the whole body of common law precedent, and very little of that supports socialism. Consequently, if you are a Left-wing graduate student or professor in literature or law and you are confronted with the Western legal or literary canon, you have two choices. You can take on the opposing traditions, have your students read the great books and the great decisions, and argue with them in your classes. That is very hard work and also very risky—your students might come to agree with the wrong side. Or you can find a way to dismiss the whole tradition, so that you can teach only books that fit your politics. If you are looking for shortcuts, or if you have a sneaking suspicion that the right side might not fare well in the debate, then deconstruction is seductive. Deconstruction allows you

²¹ In Koertge 1998, Sokal discusses reactions to the *Social Text* hoax. Also included in that volume are many useful studies of postmodernists' misuse of science and the history of science. See also Gross and Levitt 1997.

to dismiss whole literary and legal traditions as built upon sexist or racist or otherwise exploitative assumptions. It provides a justification for setting them aside.

However, in order to use this strategy, do you really have to believe that Shakespeare was a misogynist, that Hawthorne was a secret Puritan, or that Melville was a technological imperialist? No. Deconstruction can simply be employed as a rhetorical method for ridding oneself of an obstacle.

On this Machiavellian hypothesis, then, postmodernism is not a leap of faith for the academic Left, but instead a clear-eyed political strategy that uses relativism but does not believe it.²²

Ressentiment postmodernism

A psychologically darker streak runs through postmodernism, one that none of the above explanations has so far captured. The above explain postmodernism as a response to extreme skepticism, as a faith-response to the crisis of a political vision, or as an unscrupulous political strategy. Those explanations connect the epistemology and the politics of postmodernism, and they resolve the tension between the relativist and absolutist elements of postmodernism. In the "Kantian" explanation of postmodernism, the tension is resolved by making the skepticism primary and the political commitments secondary and accidentally associated. In the "Kierkegaardian" and "Machiavellian" explanations, the tension is resolved by making the political commitments primary and the use of relativistic epistemology a matter of rationalization or political rhetorical strategy.

²² This Machiavellian interpretation of deconstructionist strategy complements Marcuse's advocacy of a double-standard in applying toleration: "Liberating tolerance, then, would mean intolerance against movements from the Right, and toleration of movements from the Left" (1969, 109).

The final option is *not to resolve the tension*. Contradiction is a psychological form of destruction, but contradictions sometimes do not matter psychologically to those who live them, because for them ultimately *nothing* matters.

Nihilism is close to the surface in the postmodern intellectual movement in a historically unprecedented way.

In the modern world, Left-wing thought has been one of the major breeding grounds for destruction and nihilism. From the Reign of Terror to Lenin and Stalin, to Mao and Pol Pot, to the upsurge of terrorism in the 1960s and 1970s, the far Left has exhibited repeatedly a willingness to use violence to achieve political ends and exhibited extreme frustration and rage when it has failed. The Left has also included many fellow-travelers from the same political and psychological universe, but without political power at their disposal. Herbert Marcuse, with his explicit call to use philosophy to achieve the “‘absolute annihilation’ of the common sense world,”²³ was only a recent and unusually explicit voice. It is that history of Left thought and practice that more moderate Left voices such as Michael Harrington’s took pains to warn us about. Reflecting on that history, Harrington wrote, “I want to avoid that absolutist view of socialism that makes it so transcendent that true believers are driven to a totalitarian rage in the effort to create a perfect order.”²⁴

From totalitarian rage to nihilism is a short step. As Nietzsche noted in *Daybreak*:

When some men fail to accomplish what they desire to do they exclaim angrily, “May the whole world perish!” This repulsive emotion is the pinnacle of envy, whose implication is “If I cannot have *something*, no one can have *anything*, no one is to *be* anything!”²⁵

²³ Marcuse 1954, 48.

²⁴ Harrington 1970, 345.

²⁵ Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, Section 304.

Nietzschean Ressentiment

Nietzsche, paradoxically, is one of the great postmodernist heroes. They cite him for his perspectivalism in epistemology, for his use of the enigmatic and loosely-structured aphoristic form instead of the more scientific treatise form, and for his psychological acuteness in diagnosing decay and hypocrisy. I want to use Nietzsche against the postmodernists for a change.

Nietzsche's concept of *ressentiment* is close to the English "resentment," but with a more curdled bitterness, more seething and poisoned and bottled up for a long time. Nietzsche uses *ressentiment* in the context of developing his famous account of master and slave morality in *Beyond Good and Evil* and more systematically in *Genealogy of Morals*. Master morality is the morality of the vigorous, life-loving strong. It is the morality of those who love adventure, who delight in creativity and in their own sense of purposefulness and assertiveness. Slave morality is the morality of the weak, the humble, those who feel victimized and afraid to venture forth into the big bad world. Weaklings are chronically passive, mostly because they are afraid of the strong. As a result, the weak feel frustrated: they cannot get what they want out of life. They become envious of the strong, and they also secretly start to hate themselves for being so cowardly and weak. But no one can live thinking he or she is hateful. And so the weak invent a rationalization—a rationalization that tells them they are the good and the moral *because* they are weak, humble, and passive. Patience is a virtue, they say, and so is humility, and so is obedience, and so is being on the side of the weak and the downtrodden. And of course the opposites of those things are evil—aggressiveness is evil, and so is pride, and so is independence, and so is being physically and materially successful.

But of course it is a rationalization, and a smart weakling is never quite going to convince himself of it. That will do damage inside. Meanwhile, the strong will be laughing at him. And that will do damage inside. And the strong and the rich will be carrying on getting stronger and richer and enjoying life. And seeing that will do damage inside. Eventually the smart weakling will feel such a combination of self-loathing and envy of his enemies that he will need to lash out. He will feel the urge to hurt, in any way he can, his hated enemy. But of course he cannot risk direct physical confrontation—he is a weakling. His only weapons are words. And so, Nietzsche argued, the weakling becomes extremely clever with words.²⁶

In our time, the world created by the Enlightenment is strong, active, and exuberant. For a while in the past century, socialists could believe the revolution was coming, that woe would come to them that are rich, and that blessed would be the poor. But that hope has been dashed cruelly. Capitalism now seems like a case of “twice two makes four,” and like Dostoevsky’s *Underground Man* it is easy to see that the most intelligent socialists would just hate that fact. Socialism is the historical loser, and if socialists know that, they will hate that fact, they will hate the winners for having won, and they will hate themselves for having picked the losing side. Hate as a chronic condition leads to the urge to destroy.

Yet political failure is too limited as an explanation for the range of nihilistic themes found in postmodernism. Postmodern thinkers hold that not just politics has failed—*everything* has failed. Being, as Hegel and Heidegger taught us, really has come to nothing. Postmodernism then, in its most extreme forms, is about driving that point home and making the nothing reign.

Clearly, I am flirting with *ad hominem* here, so I will let the postmodernists speak for themselves.

²⁶ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 1:10.

Foucault and Derrida on the end of man

In his "Introduction" to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault speaks at one point in the first person. Speaking autobiographically about his motivations for writing, Foucault speaks of his desire to erase himself: "I can lose myself and appear at last to eyes that I will never have to meet again. I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face."²⁷

Foucault extends his desire for effacement to the entire human species. At the end of *The Order of Things*, for example, he speaks almost longingly about the coming erasure of mankind: Man is "an invention of recent date" that will soon "be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea."²⁸ God is dead, wrote Hegel and Nietzsche. Man too will be dead, Foucault hopes.²⁹

Derrida too recognizes the kind of world that postmodernism is bringing about and declares his intention not to be among those who let their queasiness get the better of them. Postmodernists, he writes, are those who do not

turn their eyes away when faced by the as yet unnamable which is proclaiming itself and which can do so, as is necessary whenever a birth is in the offing, only under the species of the nonspecies, in the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity.³⁰

The bringing forth of monsters is one postmodern view of the creative process, one that heralds the end of mankind. Other postmodernists stress the ugliness of postmodern creation, at the same

²⁷ Foucault 1969, 17.

²⁸ Foucault 1966, 387; see also 1989, 67.

²⁹ See also John Gray, who argues that we must accept our "postmodern perspective of plural and provisional perspectives lacking any rational or transcendental ground or unifying world view" (1995, 153), and later connects this to an explicit call for human destruction: "Homo rapines [sic] is only one of very many species, and not obviously worth preserving" (2002).

³⁰ Derrida 1978, 293.

time suggesting that mankind is simply beside the point. Kate Ellis notes, for example, “the characteristically apolitical pessimism of most postmodernism, by which creation is simply a form of defecation.”³¹

Monsters and waste products were core themes in the world of art in the twentieth century, and there is an instructive parallel between developments in the world of art in the first half of the century and developments in the rest of the humanities in the second half of the century. With Marcel Duchamp the world of art got to postmodernism before the rest of the intellectual world.

Asked to submit something for display by the Society of Independent Artists in New York, Duchamp sent a urinal. Duchamp of course knew the history of art. He knew what had been achieved—how over the centuries art had been a powerful vehicle that called upon the highest development of the human creative vision and demanded exacting technical skill; and he knew that art had an awesome power to exalt the senses, the intellects, and the passions of those who experience it. Duchamp reflected on the history of art and decided to make a statement. The artist is a not great creator—Duchamp went shopping at a plumbing store. The artwork is not a special object—it was mass-produced in a factory. The experience of art is not exciting and ennobling—at best it is puzzling and mostly leaves one with a sense of distaste. But over and above that, Duchamp did not select just any ready-made object to display. In selecting the urinal, his message was clear: Art is something you piss on.

Dada’s themes are about meaninglessness, but its works and manifestos are meaningful philosophical statements in the context in which they are presented. *Kunst ist Scheisse* (Art is shit) was, fittingly, the motto of the Dada movement. Duchamp’s urinal was the fitting symbol. Everything is waste to be flushed away.

³¹ Ellis 1989, 46.

On this hypothesis, then, postmodernism is a generalization on Dada's nihilism. Not only is art shit, everything is.

Postmodern thinkers inherit an intellectual tradition that has seen the defeat of all of its major hopes. The Counter-Enlightenment was from the beginning suspicious of the Enlightenment's naturalism, its reason, its optimistic view of human potential, its individualism in ethics and politics, and its science and technology. For those opposed to the Enlightenment, the modern world has offered no comfort. The advocates of the Enlightenment said that science was to be the replacement for religion, but science has offered the specters of entropy and relativity. Science was to be the glory of mankind, but it has taught us that man evolved, red in tooth and claw, from the ooze. Science was to make the world a technological paradise, but it has generated nuclear bombs and super-bacilli. And the confidence in the power of reason that underlies it all has, from the postmodernists' perspective, been revealed to be a fraud. The thought of nuclear weapons in the clutches of an irrational, grasping animal is frightening.

While the neo-Enlightenment thinkers have come to terms with the modern world, from the postmodern perspective the universe has been metaphysically and epistemologically shattered. We can not turn to God or to nature, and we cannot trust reason or mankind.

But there was always socialism. As bad as the philosophical universe became in metaphysics, epistemology, and the study of human nature, there was still the vision of an ethical and political order that would transcend everything and create the beautiful collectivist society.

The failure of Left politics to achieve that vision was merely the last straw. To the postmodern mind, the cruel lessons of the modern world are that reality is inaccessible, that nothing can be known, that human potential is nothing, and that ethical and political ideals

have come to nothing. The psychological response to the loss of everything is anger and despair.

But the postmodern thinkers also find themselves surrounded by an Enlightenment world that does not understand. The postmodernists find themselves confronting a world dominated by liberalism and capitalism, by science and technology, by people who still believe in reality, in reason, and in the greatness of human potential. The world that they said was impossible and destructive has both come to be and is flourishing. The heirs of the Enlightenment are running the world, and they have marginalized the postmodernists to the academy. *Ressentiment* is then added to anger and despair.

Some retreat into quietism, and some retreat to a private world of aesthetic play and self-creation. Others, however, lash out with the intent to destroy. But again postmodernism's only weapons are words.³²

Ressentiment strategy

The twentieth-century art world again gives prescient examples. Duchamp's urinal sent the message *Piss on you*, and his later works put that general attitude into practice. His version of the *Mona Lisa* was a clear example: a reproduction of Leonardo's masterpiece with a cartoonish moustache added. That too made a statement: Here is a magnificent achievement that I cannot hope to equal, so instead I will deface it and turn it into a joke. Robert Rauschenberg took Duchamp a step further. Feeling that he was standing in the shadow of Willem de Kooning's achievements, he asked for one of

³² Here Foucault takes a cue from André Breton's surrealist use of language as the "antimatter" of the world: "The profound incompatibility between Marxists and existentialists of the Sartrian type on the one hand and Breton on the other comes no doubt that for Marx or Sartre writing is part of the world, whereas for Breton a book, a sentence, a word—those things alone constitute the antimatter of the world and can compensate for the whole universe" (1989, 12).

de Kooning's paintings—which he then obliterated and then painted over. That made a statement: I cannot be special unless I destroy your achievement first.

Deconstruction is a literary version of Duchamp and Rauschenberg. Deconstruction theory says that no work has meaning. Any apparent meaning can be transformed into its opposite, into nothing, or revealed to be a mask for something distasteful. The postmodern movement contains many people who like the idea of deconstructing other people's creative work. Deconstruction has the effect of leveling all meaning and value. If a text can mean anything, then it means nothing more than anything else—no texts are then great. If a text is a cover for something fraudulent, then doubt about everything apparently great creeps in.

That deconstructive techniques are arrayed primarily against works that do not square with postmodern commitments then makes sense.

The strategy is not new. If you hate someone and want to hurt him, then hit him where it counts. Do you want to hurt a man who loves his children and hates child molesters? Drop hints and spread rumors that he is fond of child pornography. Do you want to hurt a woman who takes pride in her independence? Spread the word that she married the man she did because he is wealthy. The truth or falsity of the rumors does not matter, and whether those you tell believe you does not really matter. What matters is that you score a direct, damaging hit to someone's psyche. You know that those accusations and rumors will cause tremors, even if they come to nothing. You get the wonderfully dark glow inside of knowing that you did it. And the rumors might just come to something after all.

The best portrait of this psychology comes from that very dead, very white European male: William Shakespeare, in his *Othello*. Iago just hated Othello, but he could not hope to defeat him in open confrontation. How then could he destroy him? Iago's strategy was to attack him where it would hurt most—through Othello's passion

for Desdemona. Iago hinted indirectly that she had been sleeping around, he spread subtle lies and innuendo about her faithfulness, he succeeded in raising a doubt in Othello's mind about the most beautiful thing in his life, and he let that doubt work like a slow poison.

Like the postmodernists, Iago's only weapons were words. The only difference is that the postmodernists are not so subtle about their intended targets.

The contemporary Enlightenment world prides itself on its commitment to equality and justice, its open-mindedness, its making opportunity available to all, and its achievements in science and technology. The Enlightenment world is proud, confident, and knows it is the wave of the future. This is unbearable to someone who is totally invested in an opposed and failed outlook. That pride is what such a person wants to destroy. The best target to attack is the Enlightenment's sense of its own moral worth. Attack it as sexist and racist, intolerantly dogmatic, and cruelly exploitative. Undermine its confidence in its reason, its science and technology. The words do not even have to be true or consistent to do the necessary damage.

And like Iago, postmodernism does not have to get the girl in the end. Destroying Othello is enough.³³

³³ Again Nietzsche captures the psychology presciently: "When would they [the men of *ressentiment*] achieve the ultimate, subtlest, sublimest triumph of revenge? Undoubtedly if they succeeded in *poisoning the consciences* of the fortunate with their own misery, with all misery, so that one day the fortunate began to be ashamed of their good fortune and perhaps said one to another: 'it is disgraceful to be fortunate: *there is too much misery!*' But no greater or more calamitous misunderstanding is possible than for the happy, well-constituted, powerful in soul and body, to begin to doubt their *right to happiness* in this fashion" (*Genealogy of Morals*, 3:14).

Post-postmodernism

Showing that a movement leads to nihilism is an important part of understanding it, as is showing how a failing and nihilistic movement can still be dangerous. Tracing postmodernism's roots back to Rousseau, Kant, and Marx explains how all of its elements came to be woven together. Yet identifying postmodernism's roots and connecting them to contemporary bad consequences does not refute postmodernism.

What is still needed is a refutation of those historical premises, and an identification and defense of the alternatives to them. The Enlightenment was based on premises opposite to those of postmodernism, but while the Enlightenment was able to create a magnificent world on the basis of those premises, it articulated and defended them only incompletely. That weakness is the sole source of postmodernism's power against it. Completing the articulation and defense of those premises is therefore essential to maintaining the forward progress of the Enlightenment vision and shielding it against postmodern strategies.

* * *