

# Part 14. Postmodernism

[This is a lightly-edited transcription of Stephen Hicks's [video lecture on Postmodernism](#). The video lecture is Part 14 of his *Philosophy of Education* video course. The full fifteen-lecture course is available free online at [Professor Hicks's website](#) and at [YouTube](#).]

## Section 1 — Postmodern Philosophy: Introduction

We now turn our attention to postmodernism. Postmodernism is a sprawling intellectual and cultural movement that began in the second half of the twentieth century. Its common themes are that the modern world has ended or that it is time for us to recognize that the modern world has reached its end limits, its nadir, and that it's time for us to move on intellectually and culturally.

Postmodernism is a *critical* movement, and it takes its point of departure to be criticizing the fundamental institutions of the modern world. It takes as its initial data the pathologies of the modern world.

So, if we survey the modern world from the postmodern perspective, all of the continued problems and crises—the ongoing existence of poverty in the modern world, the ongoing racial and ethnic conflicts domestically and around the world, the international crisis and conflict that have been characteristic of the latter part of the modern world—the increased, perhaps, environmental degradation—from a postmodern perspective all of these symptoms are part and parcels and manifestations of modernism's underlying instability, its underlying incoherence, its inability to grapple with the true nature of the human condition, if there is such a thing.

So what we are to do as postmoderns is realize that the revolutionary modern world, the last few centuries, has run its final course. All of the crises and pathologies surrounding us are indications that it is time for us prepare ourselves for a postmodern world.

Now, emphasizing the *post-* prefix here: going beyond the modern world or transcending the modern world, postmodernism is situating itself, historically, as after the modern world; but it is also situating

itself intellectually by rejecting or wanting to go beyond the intellectual principles that animated and gave life to the modern world.

So let's start by asking, first, what the modern world is. While postmodernism is a new and sprawling movement intellectually, having sub-movements in philosophy, literature, the world of art and architecture, in law, history, and so forth. That sprawling movement can be hard to wrap one's mind around, intellectually speaking.

Nonetheless, the modern world has been with us for several centuries, so we should be able to first figure out what the modern world has been all about, what its features are, so we can see what the postmoderns are reacting against.

## Section 2 — What Modernism Is, Clip 1

So: what is the modern world?

*Modernism* is one of those terms that is used variously depending upon which academic discipline one is focusing on. I am going to use *modernity* in the historian's sense or in the philosopher's sense to refer to the last half millennium. If we go *The Western World*, especially, has transformed itself intellectually, culturally, politically, scientifically, and so forth.

If we take the last 500 years as a historical unit, we can see that the kind of institutions that exist and the kind of world that people are inhabiting are dramatically different from the world that existed prior to 500 years ago. We will call that pre-1500s time the pre-modern world.

In the modern world, the dominant institutions have been (1) science. We live in a highly scientific culture. Also, (2) technology has been a defining institution of the modern world. Politically, (3) liberalism, socially and culturally, including democratic and republican political experiments, have been defining institutions of the modern world. And economically, (4) capitalism and free markets have been defining institutions.

If one goes back more than 500 years ago, there is very little science to speak of. Of course, there is technology, but nothing on the scale of the technology that has been developed in the modern world. In the pre-modern world, democratic and republican political institutions are almost nowhere, and free-market capitalism is almost nowhere, as well

as all of the related social institutions affecting the status of women, the relations between the races and different ethnicities, and so forth. All of those are very different in the modern world compared to the pre-modern world.

I want now to turn to a table that I have laid out on the whiteboard here and put all of that into some philosophical terminology.

### ***Defining Modernism and Postmodernism***

<i>Defining</i>	Premodernism	Modernism	Postmodernism
<b><i>What is real?</i></b> (Metaphysics)			
<b><i>How do I know?</i></b> (Epistemology)			
<b><i>What/who am I?</i></b> (Human Nature)			
<b><i>How should I live?</i></b> (Ethics)			
<b><i>How should we live?</i></b> (Politics and Economics)			

<b>When &amp; Where</b>			
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Here I have three historical areas: the Pre-modern era, the Modern era, and we will get to the Postmodern era soon. We will define postmodernism against both of these earlier eras. But if we take these two historical labels and track them against the philosophical categories that we've been using over the course—metaphysics, epistemology, human nature, ethics and politics—and the historical designation here, then what we can do, philosophically, is see that the intellectual

foundation of the pre-modern world is very different from the intellectual foundation of the modern world. What the postmodernists are going to argue historically and intellectually is that their way of characterizing culture is dramatically different from either the pre-modern or the postmodern.

Let's start with the pre-modern world, that is, the pre-modern Western world, which is essentially the European world prior to 1500s or so, the whole Medieval era. What was the defining set of intellectual presuppositions that shaped the institutions of the pre-modern world? What was the Medieval world like metaphysically, epistemologically, and so on? Well, metaphysically, this was an intensely religious world. The dominant assumption is some sort of supernaturalism: the natural world is a lower world, a less important world, while there is also a higher world, the world of God; and all of our energy should be focused on coming to know and understand the higher and truer spiritual reality that is represented by God.

Epistemologically, the dominant institutions are reliance upon *mystical* experiences that are delivered in *revelations*, and then captured in holy *scriptures*. Those writings are then handed down through the *tradition*, and everyone in the tradition is expected to accept the revealed word of God on *faith*. There is a distinction here between those who emphasized that we should have faith directly in Scriptures versus those who emphasized that we should have faith in Scripture as interpreted by the authorized institutional tradition, the Catholic Church primarily.

Human nature: the primary presupposition here is that human beings are born in *sin*, and that they are beings that are fundamentally *dependent* for their being, for their continued existence, and for their ability to achieve anything positive in the world on a higher power, that higher power primarily being God. Or they are dependent upon God's institution, the Church, to work through them and with them in order to achieve whatever is necessary.

Ethically speaking, people in the Medieval world are primarily constrained by *duty*. Everybody is, whatever their station in life—and there are of course a number of classes, given that it is a highly hierarchical society—but depending on one's station in life, one has an attendant set of duties toward other people. Wives have duties with respect to their husbands; husbands and their families have duties with respect with their feudal lords; the feudal lords have obligations and

duties with respect to the king; and the king and everybody in the society have duties with respect to the Church and to God. The assumption is that individuals should, ideally, be doing their duties *sacrificially*: everybody is willing to serve, to give up, and renounce whatever is necessary for the sake of doing their duty.

Politically, pre-modern society is feudal. A feudal society is a *hierarchical* society. It is characterized by a vertical organization in the *political* structure with the king at the top, then the aristocrats, then the guilds, and then the serfs or peasants and slaves below them. In the *religious* structure, we have the Pope at the top, then cardinals, then bishops, then priests, and all the way down to the laity. We have a society that is based on a kind of authority or authoritarianism that works in a top-down fashion. One's political rights and responsibilities are defined by the position that one finds oneself in in the hierarchy.

So this set of philosophical principles here are characteristic of what we call the feudal world, broadly speaking; or in the Western context, what we call the Medieval world.

We can track that in terms of our philosophical "isms," and we can say, broadly speaking, that it's the Idealistic philosophical tradition that is institutionalized culturally in the Medieval world with feudalism as the result.

Defining	Premodernism	Modernism	Postmodernism
<b>What is real?</b> (Metaphysics)	Realism: Super-naturalism		
<b>How do I know?</b> (Epistemology)	Mysticism and/or faith		
<b>What/who am I?</b> (Human Nature)	Original Sin Subject to God's will Dualism		
<b>How should I live?</b> (Ethics)	Collectivism: altruism		

<b>How should we live?</b> (Politics and Economics)	Feudalism		
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<b>When &amp; Where</b>	Medieval		
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### Section 3 — What Modernism Is, Clip 2

Next, intellectual and philosophical historians point out that, by the time we get to the 1500s, dramatic changes are taking place in Western Europe. Europe is about to transform itself intellectually and, as a result of that, it's going to transform itself culturally, institutionally, politically, economically and so forth.

I am first going to go to the epistemological issues here. What we find at work is that there is first a stronger emphasis on the role of *reason*; we can find the early scientists being much more *naturalistic*, the philosophers being much more naturalistic in their thinking, using reason to come to understand the natural world. Even within theological circles, as a result of the influence some of the earlier Greek thinkers through Thomas Aquinas and the Thomistic tradition, the scholastic tradition is using a kind of reason. There is less reliance rather, even within the religious traditions, upon going by mysticism and faith strictly. We find a shift toward reason having more pride of place. In stronger forms we find that reason should work with the senses or, in more radical cases, even be based on the senses. So we have a much more empirical orientation epistemologically that emerges.

Concurrent with that we have a rising naturalism—a much greater influence or interest in the natural world as opposed to the traditional argument that the natural world is not particularly worthy of our attention. This naturalism comes in a variety of forms. We are interested in the natural world because the natural world is God's creation, and so by coming to understand the natural world, we will come to understand God. Or, we can become interested in the natural world in its own right as a beautiful and interesting place with all kinds

of exciting things to study and to come to know. So we find a rising naturalism and an interest in the natural world metaphysically.

There is a concurrent development with respect to human nature: a notion that human beings are more likely to be born *tabula rasa* rather than a traditional notion that we're born in sin. Here, there is a rising development of the idea that goes back to Aristotle, that human beings are born with a set of capacities that can be developed for good or for evil, but less of an emphasis on the idea that we're born with the original sin. And there is an increasing notion here that human beings, through independent effort, by the thoughts they create, and by the actions they engage, can achieve some station in life by their own efforts.

Ethically, we find in concurrent development with this emphasis on natural world much more of an emphasis on the idea of the pursuit of happiness being a legitimate aim of life. Certainly by the time we get to the 1700s, this language is pretty much everywhere. It's not accidental, then, that it becomes an explicit part of a Declaration of Independence, one of the great revolutionary documents of the 18th century. The idea that it is legitimate to pursue a certain amount of pleasure in this world, to enjoy one's body, to enjoy various essential pleasures, to enjoy the natural world. And that is not necessarily in conflict with one's spiritual development or one's religious pursuits as well, to the extent that one is religious here.

And then politically there is a dramatic series of revolutions here that occur as the modern world goes on, that rather than individuals being subject to various hierarchical authorities, we start to emphasize the liberty of individuals to think for themselves on religious matters, to go their own way in their economic pursuits, rather than being class-wise bound to a certain station in life. When it comes to the law, all individuals should be equal under the laws rather than having different laws applying and granting more or fewer privileges to individuals depending on where they are in the hierarchical structure. So, politically, the themes of liberty and equality come to dominate in the modern world, and there are revolutions based on those principles.

So what we have then is a systematic opposition, philosophically, between the intellectual themes that come to dominate in the modern world and the intellectual themes that had dominated in the pre-

modern world. In our language again, broadly speaking, pre-modernism comes out of the Idealistic tradition philosophically, and modernism comes from the Realist tradition philosophically speaking. A collision plays out historically in the early modern world. In the early modern world, it is the realist tradition that comes to the ascendancy, and it is the one that reshapes the world into what we have come to call the modern way of thinking.

Defining	Premodernism	Modernism	Postmodernism
<b>What is real?</b> (Metaphysics)	Realism: Super-naturalism	Realism: Naturalism	
<b>How do I know?</b> (Epistemology)	Mysticism and/or faith	Objectivism: experience & reason	
<b>What/who am I?</b> (Human Nature)	Original Sin Subject to God's will Dualism	Tabula rasa; nature/ nurture/choice combo	
<b>How should I live?</b> (Ethics)	Collectivism: altruism	Autonomy	
<b>How should we live?</b> (Politics and Economics)	Feudalism	Integration	

<b>When &amp; Where</b>	Medieval	Enlightenment; current science, business, technical fields	
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## Section 4 — The Enlightenment Vision, Clip 1

Now I want to change colors for the chart here and, by the time we get to the mid-process here, the dates here. You start to see the beginnings of these developments in the early Renaissance and certainly things were well underway by the time we get to the 1500s. The *intellectual* revolution occurs, and then by the time we get to the 1700s,

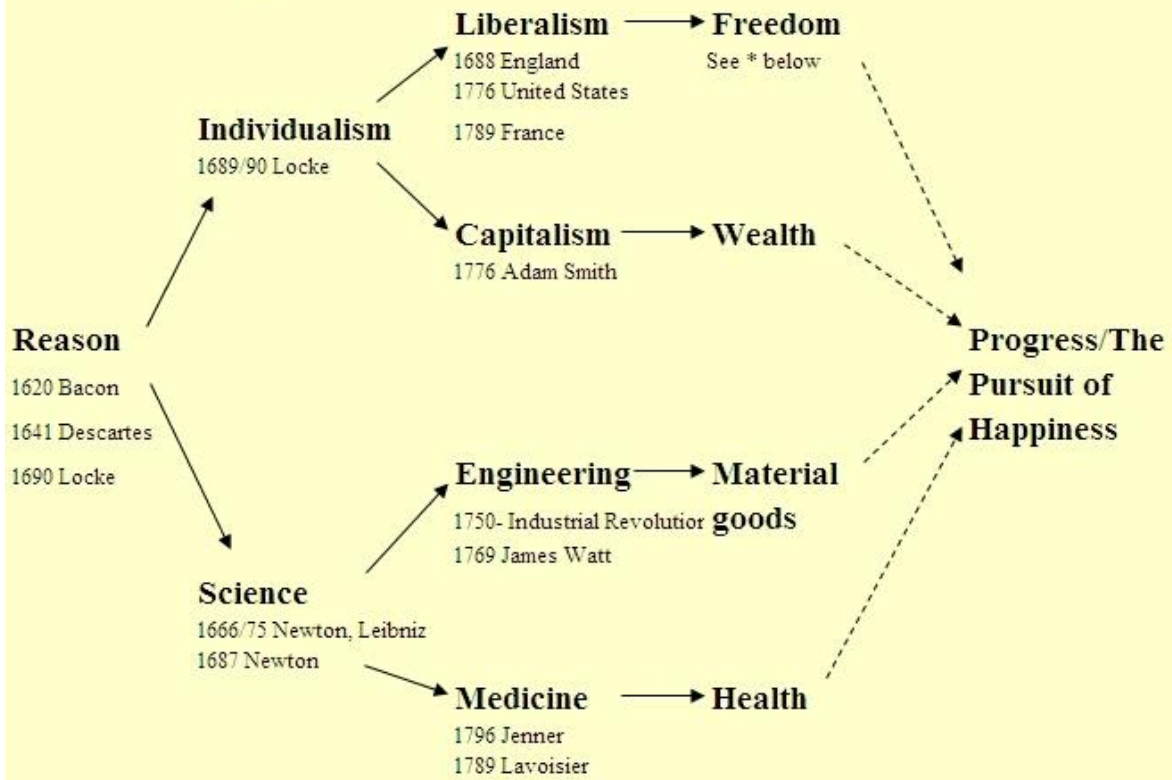


*institutionally* a culture starts to change very dramatically. There are all kinds of revolutions—revolutions because in historical time, they happened relatively quickly. They happened in the scientific world, they happened technologically, they happened economically, and they happened politically. With respect to many social institutions, by the time we get to the 1700s we have a very revolutionary century at work.

Now, the 1700s is given the label “The Enlightenment” by most historians and intellectual historians. Whether we date the Enlightenment from the late 1600s and have it spilling over into the 1800s or so, there is, of course, much room for debate and discussion about where exactly one draws the lines. But, nonetheless, the 18<sup>th</sup> century or the 1700s is the Age of Enlightenment.

What I now want to do is develop a flow chart that takes these themes philosophically and shows how they play out along a timeline, historically speaking. I want to start by calling this *The Enlightenment Vision*, a label that I think is useful. I call it a “vision” in part because it is taking abstract philosophy and some cultural development that had occurred in the 1500s and 1600s but projecting how this will play out to the extent that those themes are institutionalized culturally.

# *The Enlightenment Vision*



I want to start with the emphasis that we find in the modern world on *reason*, the epistemological theme. If we go to the early modern world, we find in philosophers like Francis Bacon in England and then across the channel, René Descartes in France, and then in the next generation, John Locke (again in England)—and in an increasingly large number of intellectuals, we find is a strong emphasis on reason. There are various accounts of reason that are being worked out by this generation or two of philosophers, but what they all have in common is the idea that human beings are creatures of reason: we have a rational capacity, and the most important thing that we should be doing epistemologically is developing our rational capacity. There are then great battles between the advocates of reason and those advocating faith and tradition. Many of the early conflicts between philosophers and theologians, or between the early scientists and theologians, were ongoing in the 1500s and the early 1600s. But what we find, though, is that by the time we get significantly into the 1600s, is that it's the arguments for reason that have prevailed, and reason becomes institutionalized.

If one takes seriously the notion that reason is one's way of coming to understand the natural world, then what becomes almost inevitable is

that science is developed as an institution. And so, in the *early* 1600s, as I mentioned here, we have the development of reason—Francis Bacon, René Descartes. By the time we get to the *middle* part of the 1600s and on to the 1700s, we can see that the foundations of modern science were laid: Galileo emerges in the early part of the 1600s, and Isaac Newton emerges in the latter part of the 1600s. With them, astronomy and physics are being put on a fundamentally sound scientific footing. And then all of the various other branches of science start to be developed. By the time we get into the 1700s, chemistry is coming online, and then biology. We thereby were developing a naturalistic understanding of the world through physics, astronomy, chemistry, biology, and so forth.

Now, if we then take that rational, scientific understanding and include our understanding of ourselves, then what starts to happen is a scientific understanding of the human being, its elements, and what it makes it work effectively. You see modern medicine coming into existence. By the time we get to the 1700s, anatomical and physiological studies are coming along. The science of vaccination with Edward Jenner is coming along, and a better understanding of nutrition is coming along. So we have a scientific understanding of what we will then call modern medicine.

One other thing that comes out of the development of modern science is the development of technology. As science progresses and we come to understand the cause-and-effect relationships in the world, we are put in a position to manipulate the cause-and-effect relationships in the world to develop new kinds of technologies to do various sorts of things. This is going on in the early 1600s, and then picking up steam in the late 1600s and on to the 1700s. We see science developing starting in the 1600s and then going on into the 1700s, and what makes sense is that by the time we get to the mid-1700s we should see some technological improvements. And we did: in the early part of the 1700s agricultural technology changing dramatically, first in England, but then also increasingly on the continent. Also, engineering and industrial technology started to take off. The Industrial Revolution is usually dated from around 1750 or so. But certainly by the time we get to 1770, with James Watt's steam engine and the enormous potential that unleashes, the Industrial Revolution becomes a potent force.

So, taking reason seriously leads to science, and science leads to modern medicine. Science also leads to modern technology. These institutions then transform the world.

To the extent that we have better modern medicine, what starts to happen is that people's health improves. One measure of people's health is that they live longer lives and they live lives that are less painful.

Also, as the Industrial Revolution transforms the human productive capacity: agricultural yields go up dramatically and factory yields go up dramatically, so people start to have increasing amounts of stuff. And, of course, the more stuff there is, the price of that stuff goes down, so a broader number of people are able to enjoy that stuff.

We can certainly see these trends in the data: human life expectancy starts to change in the 1700s and increases as the 1800s go on and then dramatically in the 20th century. The amount of material goods, the quantity of them, and the quality of them improve as the 1800s and the 1900s go on.

## Section 5 — The Enlightenment Vision, Clip 2

Okay, now suppose we backtrack to reason [here in the flowchart]. So far, we've been focusing more on the epistemological implications of taking reason seriously in the study of the natural world, including the study of the human being as a natural being.

What happens if we take an epistemological emphasis on reason and apply it to ethical, value, and political issues as well? Well, one thing that happens significantly as this new emphasis on reason emerges is, in the early modern world, an emphasis on individualism.

The contrast notion in the pre-modern world, to the extent that we are expected to act on faith, is the notion that we are dependent. All of that was part and parcel of the feudal world's class system—that you are *dependent* upon the larger community, you are *dependent* upon God, you are *dependent* upon knowing your place and doing what you are told, and you are expected to act on faith and just accept your lot in life.

But to the extent we emphasize reason, every individual has his or her own rational capacity. And if reason is a legitimate and competent

capacity, then what we should do is a rise and respect for, an emphasis on, respecting the individual's own rational judgments as the source of decisions of what should go on in their lives.

And what we do see as a result of this is an increasing emphasis on liberalism in various aspects of human life. For example, *religious* liberalism. The new idea is that—rather than my being expected to simply accept a certain religious tradition because I happen to have been born into it—and rather than my being expected to accept what other people say is true in religious grounds—what we find is a rising emphasis that I should be free on religious matters to think for myself about what's true, to come up with my own interpretation of what is true. And if I disagree with other people, I am free to go my own way on religious matters, to start my own church, and to worship my own particular way.

Also, if it is a matter of rational individuality applied to my own *political* life, then what I should be able to do should not be simply a matter of my being born into a certain station in life and other people having political authority to tell me what I should be doing. Rather, if there are political institutions that are having an effect on my life, I should be free to participate in those political institutions and to have some say in how those political institutions are shaped in various ways. So, with the development of reason in the 1600s, by the time we get to the 1700s, individualism is being taken seriously.

It is not accidental that by the time we get seriously into the 1700s we have a number of political revolutions. By the time we get to the latter part of the 1700s, there is the liberal revolution in the American colonies, the bringing into existence of the United States—a kind of democratic republicanism that involves a revolution against the remnants of a feudal system across the ocean in England under King George. And, of course, the American revolutionaries were arguing that we should not be having a feudal, monarchical system: we should have a kind of liberal system, a democratic republic, and Americans should not be second class citizens relative to the English, and so forth.

A few years later, in France, again, another revolution in the name of the principles of equality and liberty against the traditional, hierarchical system against the French feudal system—King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette and a still-very-powerful Catholic Church. We get in that

case, a bloodier revolution that ultimately was not successful, but at least in principle, we are getting rid of the older feudal system and trying to institute a modern system based on principles of liberty and equality.

So, as a result of that, what we should find in the modern world is that individuals have an increasing amount of *freedom*. As it has played out in the 1800s, the new equality and the new liberties were first extended to males.

There is then the development of anti-slavery societies in the late 1700s, and by the time we get to the 1800s slavery is gradually eliminated from England, from France, and from America and their possessions around the world.

By the time we get to the late 1700s, we see women also arguing that the same principles that apply to men should obviously apply to women. Women are also rational individuals who can think for themselves, and so they should have some political say. So we find various kinds of early feminist movements taking off in the 1800s, arguing for the same freedoms. Women should be able to own property in their own name, vote, go to school, choose their careers, choose their marital partners as opposed to simply being part of a collective family with a hierarchy in the family, that is to say, primarily the father who makes the decision about whom they will marry, and so forth.

So we see increasing amounts of freedom as the 18th century ends and on into the 19th century.

## Section 6 — The Enlightenment Vision, Clip 3

Now, if we take individualism seriously, there will also be economic implications. We also find a dramatic increase in capitalist and free-market institutions. We see a breakdown of the feudal economic structure that had been around for a great deal of time. Rather than only the king being able to own property, and perhaps a few nobles being able to own property, and maybe a few freeholders here and there—property rights were increasingly extended to everybody. Everybody in principle can own property.

No longer is the career path that one follows dictated by one's place in the class structure. Under feudalism, if you were born a woman, then

here is what your career path is going to be. If you were born the son of the duke, here is what your career path is going to be. If your father is a tinsmith or a haberdasher or a cooper, here is what your career path is going to be. It's all set out. Instead, what we have is individuals being free to make their own individual, rational choices about what they want to do with their lives.

So, we have liberty rights and property rights in the economic sphere. People are increasingly seen as free agents, free individuals, free to enter into whatever sorts of contractual arrangements they want with other people as well.

By the time we get to the late 1700s, we find capitalistic, free-market institutions coming to dominate the world. And even though the American Revolution in 1776 was primarily a political revolution, it had a number of economic implications as well. Also in 1776 the first modern treatise on capitalist free-market institutions, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* is published. The implication of that is that, because capitalist institutions are much more productive, if you have people choosing their own careers, and you have contract and property rights, and so forth, we should have societies that are much wealthier than traditional feudal societies.

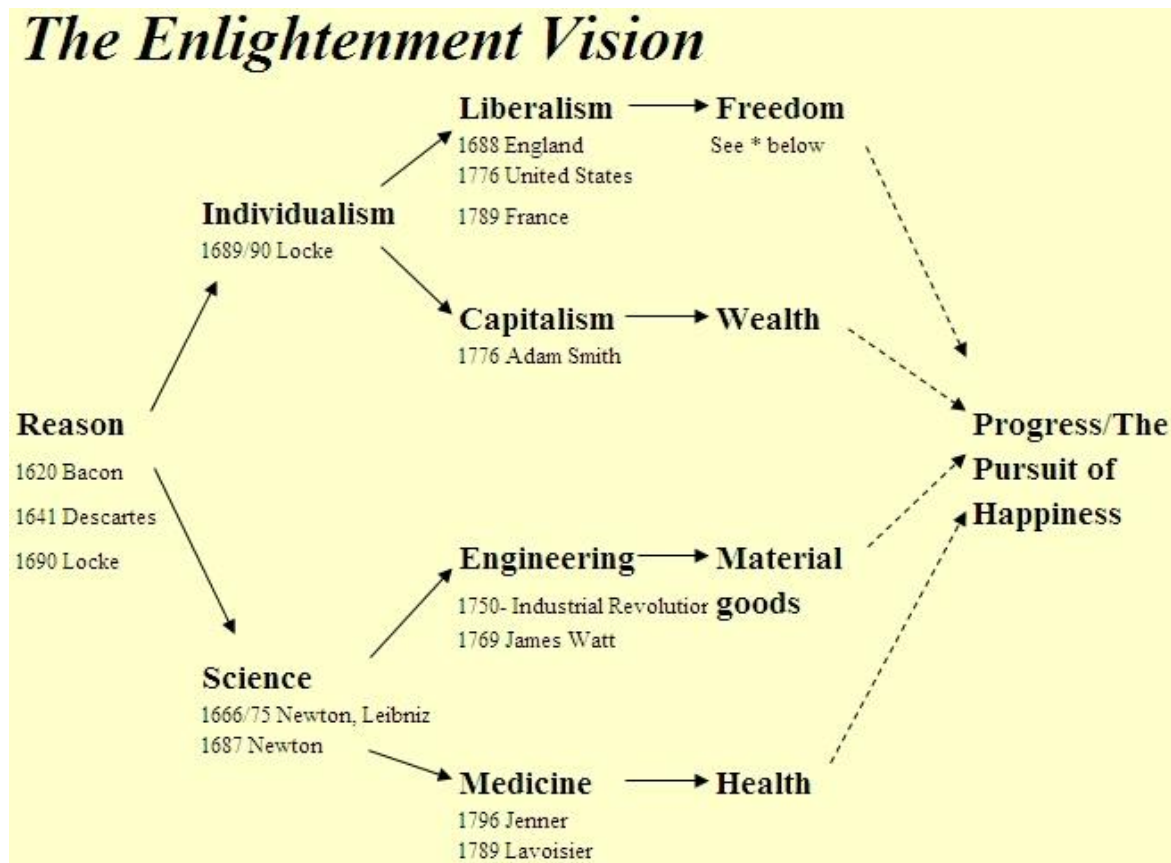
On why I am calling this the Enlightenment Vision: the intellectuals of the 1700s are noticing the trend toward political liberalism, the trend toward economic capitalism, the Industrial Revolution, and the various revolutions in medicine and science more broadly speaking. All of these revolutionary things are coming into place, and we can trace that back to some philosophical revolutions that occurred in the 1600s. That Vision allows us, then, to *project* what is going to happen over the course of the next century or so. Any number of 18<sup>th</sup>-century intellectuals will predict and argue, very optimistically, that human beings' future is going to be one of *progress*—that we have finally figured out a set of philosophical principles that when institutionalized will make people free, and that freedom will be more progressive.

People will be wealthier, people will have more material goods, and poverty will not be a natural, inescapable amount of life. People will live longer, and they will live healthier and relatively pain-free lives. That progress is the natural birthright of human kind. That there is not a human problem that can't be solved with the application of reason and

all of reason's institutions. And so, we can think progressively, we can think in terms of the pursuit of happiness being the natural birthright, we can think of freedom, health, and ultimately wisdom, and so forth as the natural lot of men.

This is the Enlightenment Vision, as I am calling it, and here is a way of developing in flow chart form how this set of modern, philosophical themes is expected to develop historically. This is an abstract timetable, characterizing some abstract themes. If we operationalize it politically, economically, and in terms of scientific and technological institutions, and make it an actual working part of the machinery of culture, the argument is that this is what is going to play out. And so we have a very optimistic and very good news story about the modern world.

Next: what does all of this have to do with postmodernism?



## Section 7 — Post-modernism's Themes, Clip 1

What all of this has to do with postmodernism is that the postmodernists will argue that the entire Enlightenment Vision is excrement: it's all wrong, it's a fraud, it's a self-congratulatory patting-



oneself-on-the-back story that the modernists will tell. Certainly the modernists were revolutionary with respect to the pre-modernists—but from the postmodernist's perspective, by the time the modern world has developed for a couple of centuries this whole story has been revealed to be a fraud.

What the postmodernists argue is that every cell on this Vision flowchart has been revealed to be a wrong and that the pathological elements of it have dominated it.

Suppose we take, for example, the chart's liberal element. The modern world will pride itself on its commitment to freedom for individuals, its commitment to extending the franchise, to gradually eliminating various barriers. But what the postmodernists will argue is that this is not true if you look at anybody who is not a white, male, Anglo-Saxon. The promise of freedom that the modernists make is a fraud because we are still in a society that is dominated by sexism—males dominating females—by whites as a group dominating non-whites as a group, by those who have various kinds of ethnic backgrounds dominating other ethnicities, and so forth. So, we have a society riven with sexism, racism, and so forth.

Further, the claims that capitalism is going to generate huge amounts of wealth, that property rights are going to be extended more broadly, and that economic liberty rights are going to be extended, from this prospective, has also been revealed to be a fraud. Certainly, there has been a great deal of wealth generated, but what the postmodernists will argue is that the Marxist analysis is essentially right: we have an economic system that is characterized by a small group of people at the top—rich people—who have succeeded in co-opting control of most of society's wealth, and who are using it to advantage themselves at the expense of everyone else in society.

Regarding technology, the modernists will tell us the good-news story about all of these technologies—cars, the airplanes, the personal entertainment devices, and so on. But the postmodern argument is that all of its technology is in fact damaging human relationships with each other. We have, for example, nuclear weapons and various kinds of high-tech military devices that are products of the modern world, and ultimately what this is going to mean is human beings are simply going to be able to exterminate large numbers of other human beings, and

that these nuclear weapons are going to be tools that the rich and those in positions of cultural dominance use to keep the other people under threat. Also these technologies we are developing—our ability to drive our own cars, to have central heating, to be able to fly anywhere we want around the world—are ultimately destroying the environment. The modern world is self-destroying the world, but nonetheless it is talking a pretty story about environmental beautification, pretending to be green, and so forth.

Also, if we look at the scientific institutions here that the modern world prides itself on, the argument that many postmodernists will make is that scientific ways of thinking about the world—this emphasis on reason, on experiment, on analysis, on being able to do mathematics, and so forth—that way of thinking about the world is just one way of thinking about the world. Perhaps some white males are proficient, but this is not necessarily the only way of thinking about the world. So what the modernists are doing is being *intellectually imperialistic*, if we can use that language, and making everybody bow down before science and telling us that the scientists and those with scientific knowledge are the ones we should be putting up on pedestals. The claims of the scientists are being allowed to eclipse various other ways of human beings trying to come to know the world and themselves.

Also, this individualism that the modernists prize: postmodernists will argue that it is a mask for what really is an ongoing group conflict. Human beings are not really individuals. Instead, we are defined by our cultural identities, our economic backgrounds, our sexual gender roles, our racial groups, and the various kinds of technological environments we find ourselves involved in. Human beings are group creatures, constructed by the group memberships they have. All of this rhetoric about being our own individuals and thinking for ourselves is a fraud used to cover various kinds of group conflicts.

And the fundamental point here, the postmodernists will argue, is that this emphasis on reason, on the competence of reason, and on our ability objectively to come to know the world—that all of that has been revealed to be a fraud. Instead, the truth, if I can use that language, is a kind of skepticism about the claims of reason. Reason comes up with various kinds of stories that it can tell, of course, but its stories are really just stories. All we have is a bunch of narratives, and these narratives are subjective creations--in many cases group-subjective

creations. Not one of them can we ever figure out to be the true account of the way the world really is.

So the argument, then, is that everything I've got in black on the whiteboard [the postmodernists' perspective] is a better description of the way the world actually works. All of those things are the exact opposite of everything in green on the whiteboard—that is, the self-congratulatory story that the modernists want us to believe about the world.

But the truth is—if we can use language of “truth” in the context of postmodernism—that everything in the green doesn't actually end up in this happy story about the pursuit of happiness and progress.

Instead, the “truth” about the world really is a kind of cynical truth that the world is really governed by power and conflict, and that—rather than a happy-ever-after kind of story—the world is going to be one of ongoing zero-sum, win versus lose, this group versus that group in struggles for power, and so on.

## Section 8 — Post-modernism's Themes, Clip 2

Next I want to return then to the Premodern/Modern/Postmodern table and—abstracting from this Vision flow chart—put in more philosophical language here. We can see, then, a principled contrast between the postmodern philosophical themes and the themes that emanate and then became institutionalized in these two earlier systems.

Defining	Premodernism	Modernism	Postmodernism
<b>What is real?</b> (Metaphysics)	Realism: Super-naturalism	Realism: Naturalism	Antirealism
<b>How do I know?</b> (Epistemology)	Mysticism and/or faith	Objectivism: experience & reason	Social subjectivism
<b>What/who am I?</b> (Human Nature)	Original Sin Subject to God's will Dualism	Tabula rasa; nature/ nurture/choice combo	Social determinism

<b>How should I live?</b> (Ethics)	Collectivism: altruism	Autonomy	Group conflict
<b>How should we live?</b> (Politics and Economics)	Feudalism	Integration	Reductionism

<b>When &amp; Where</b>	Medieval	Enlightenment; current science, business, technical fields	Current humanities and related professions
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The postmodernists argue that the claims of reason have been shown, by the time we get to 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy, to be fatally flawed, just as the claims of mysticism and faith in the earlier generation were shown to be fatally flawed. And in postmodernism, a skepticism about *both* the claims of mysticism and the claims of reason will play out as a thorough-going skepticism. Using the standard postmodern language here: all we have are *narratives*. We have any number of competing narratives, and we all, of course, believe that our particular narrative is the right narrative. But there is no way to step outside of any of the stories that we've come to believe and judge them objectively against each other or against any sort of independent world. There is no meta-stance that we can take and no one true meta-narrative that we can come up with, so all we are left with is a bunch of relative, group-defined, competing narratives [*Social subjectivism*, in the table].

Now, this next applies metaphysically. The label I am going to put in the table here is *anti-realism*. The postmodernists will argue that if we are skeptical about all narratives, then that will include any metaphysical narratives. And, of course, one of great battles historically has been between those who believe in the existence of God and those who are naturalistic. But both of them are making the claim that there is a true account, metaphysically, of the world that can be given. They simply disagree over whether reality, however it is conceived, ultimately just is the natural world or the natural world plus the supernatural world. As skeptics, the postmodernists argue that there is no such thing as a true account of reality. That is to say, they are anti-realistic; they don't think a "true" account of reality can be given. Now, it is not that

they think that this one is definitely false or this one is definitely true. It is meaningless to try to address metaphysical questions and come up with a real account of the way the world works.

With respect to human nature, the postmodernists first contrast to the pre-modernist claim that individuals are born in sin. Certainly there are collectivist elements in pre-modernism—the Original Sin claim, for example. In most such traditional accounts there is a collective guilt that all humans bear independent of the particular things that they may have not yet done as individuals. Even infants, for example, are said to be born in sin. But, nonetheless, this sin is seen as something that inheres in individuals, and individuals' primary responsibility is to realize their dependence on God and to form the right kind of relationship with God. By the time we get to the *modern* world, there is a kind of individualism: moderns see individuals as independent, *tabula rasa* creatures with the set of capacities that they can develop for good or for evil.

By contrast, what we find strongly developed in postmodernism is the notion that human beings are fundamentally members of groups. They are members of racial groups, gender groups, ethnic groups, economic groups, and these group memberships define who one is. And so we have what I am going to call *group determinism*. Postmodernists are, for the most part, environmental determinists. But their environmental determinism is of a collectivist variety, that is, each one of us is an overlapping set of racial, sexual, and ethnic groups that one finds oneself formed by, and that one's group memberships then define what one comes to believe.

When it comes to the *ethics* in postmodernism, what we find is a strong emphasis on the idea of the world being driven by conflict, that it is a world of oppression, of stronger groups being able to beat up and take advantage of the weaker groups, and what we should do is have compassion for those groups that have been typically and traditionally on the losing end of these various conflicts. So, a great deal of empathy, or pity, or compassion, or identification with those groups that have been on the losing end of various kinds of conflicts here.

In politics, postmoderns reject what the modern world created. We have, broadly speaking, a capitalistic or a free-market democratic-republic orientation that has come out of the modern world. The feudal

notion came out of the pre-modern world. What we will find in postmodernism is a strong emphasis on egalitarianism as an ideal against which we should measure social progress. Egalitarianism comes from the French word for *equality* being *égalité*. It is not that the world is actually characterized by egalitarianism or any equality. Instead, what we have is unequal groups in conflict with each other. But egalitarianism, nonetheless, should be a kind of regulative ideal guiding our thinking. We should be striving to achieve some sort of equal group membership. More pragmatically, that means fighting against the feudalism that is characteristic of the pre-modern world and the capitalism that is characteristic of the modern world.

All of the major postmodernists are or were significantly during their careers, advocates of a *socialist* political and economic kind of institution.

## Section 9 — Post-modernism's Themes, Clip 3

I'd next like to make some connections of postmodernism to some of the earlier intellectual movements that we've looked at earlier in this course. The postmodernists are a latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century intellectual movement, and certainly their influence in educational circles started to be felt by the time that we got to latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But it is also true to say that the postmodernists were all aware of the earlier philosophical traditions and earlier educational traditions—and while they disagree radically and fundamentally with many or most of them, they are nonetheless also drawing on certain of those earlier traditions as well. So I want to make a few connections.

If we go to epistemology, for example, one of the interesting things is that many of the postmodernists will describe themselves as neo-Pragmatists. For example, Richard Rorty, an American postmodernist, will describe his thinking as strongly influenced by John Dewey and his pragmatism. There is a school of law called Legal Pragmatism that is one of the postmodernist wings of legal scholarship. What has been drawn on by the postmodernists is the pragmatists' skepticism. Postmodernism's skepticism is a radicalized skepticism that we first find in the modern world and in pragmatic thinkers such as John Dewey, William James, and others. Pragmatists were skeptical about what they saw as the overreaching claims of the power of the reason that the realist and early modern thinkers had developed. So the pragmatists

argued for a more chastened version of reason, though still relying on reason to whatever extent that we are capable of doing so. What we find with the postmodernists, though, is they take the skeptical arguments of the pragmatists and really run with them, reaching the extreme conclusion that there is no such thing as truth. Instead, all we have are a bunch of stories that more or less seem to work, but different groups have different stories and different ideas about what works, and that's just our predicament. So, there is a connection between pragmatism epistemologically and postmodernism.

Let's now take issues of human nature. I've emphasized here the notion of determinism, that environmental determinism is a dominant understanding of how human beings come into existence. In our discussions, we talked about Behaviorism, Behaviorism being a school of thought emphasizing the plasticity of human nature: if you take a human being and put it into any environment that one wants, one can construct the kind of human being that one wants. The postmodernists are influenced by Behaviorism and Marxism. Marxism also emphasizes environmental determinism, which the postmodernists are strongly advocating that as well. But rather than it simply being the individual who is the unit that has been operated on, the postmodernists cast it in a group direction. The determining forces are conflict and oppression: human relations are not characterized by or forged in benevolence, win-win trade, friendship, and so forth.

In postmodernism we also get a deep sense that the human condition is fundamentally flawed, that we're reaching a world that is in crisis, that we don't know what to do, and there is no God to tell us the right answer. Nor can science be turned to for a right set of answers. Nonetheless, we have to make choices.

All of those themes and that emotional universe of darkness, conflict, and oppression being front and central to us, are characteristic of postmodernism. This means that the postmodernists do have a strong connection to many of the Existentialists. Many of the postmodern thinkers are French intellectuals, and they are the French intellectuals of the next generation after the first generation of existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. And while they would disagree with some of the Existentialists' themes, they nonetheless will characteristically adopt and stick with that emotional center of gravity

that is Existentialism. So, there are strong connections then between the Postmodernism and Existentialism.

Let's turn to politics. This is a story that I am going to be developing at great length here, as postmodernism is a highly-politicized movement. As important as the epistemological issues are, it's arguable that for the postmodernists politics really is the central motor of the movement. Consider the tradition of Marxism. Marxism emphasizes a certain kind of socialism, that we should be strictly egalitarian, group determinism, conflict between stronger and weaker. That whole way of characterizing the human political and economic dynamic and then holding up as a regulative ideal some kind of egalitarian socialist notion. The postmoderns draw strongly upon that Marxist tradition, and so it's fair to characterize many of the postmodernists as neo-Marxists.

So, in characterizing postmodernism's connections to earlier intellectual movements, it makes sense to say that the postmoderns are a hybrid movement. They take things from Pragmatism and radicalize them, doing the same with Behaviorism, doing the same for Existentialism, and doing the same for Marxism.

If we go to metaphysics, what they are doing is mounting a very radical critique both of the Idealist tradition that dominated in the pre-modern world and Realist tradition that dominated in the modern world. They are then both anti-Idealist and anti-Realist. And then, with Idealism, Realism, Pragmatism, Behaviorism, Existentialism, and Marxism, we have most of the other movements that we have spent time on this semester.

Postmodernism sees itself as reacting fundamentally against certain of them, but incorporating certain grains of truth, of at least grain of appropriateness from certain of the others.

What I want to turn next to is some quotations from postmodernist thinkers in their own words, emphasizing several of the above themes.

## Section 10 — Quotations from Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida, Clip 1

Now I would like to read you some quotations from leading postmodernists of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and make some connections



between those quotations and some of the themes that I have been putting up [in the Table] in abstract form.

The first one from Michel Foucault, a French postmodern thinker:

“It is meaningless to speak in the name of—or against—Reason, Truth, or Knowledge.”

Here the key theme Foucault is attacking is the notion of *reason*. He is saying it is meaningless to speak *on behalf of* reason—but he is also saying that it is equally meaningless to speak *against* reason. We are so skeptical that the issue of reason’s status is just not even in the cards.

But along with reason, Foucault mentions *truth* and *knowledge*. Truth is now a meaningless concept. Knowledge is a meaningless concept. Prior to this radical skepticism, truth meant something. In some sense, there is a connection between what goes on in our heads and the way the world actually is. Or to speak of knowledge is to say that we have a certain cognitive orientation to the way the world is. But the radical skepticism that Foucault is embracing here, which is characteristic of the postmodernists, indicates that it is just completely pointless. So reason is entirely out.

The next quotation I would like to read is from Stanley Fish, an American postmodernist. “Deconstructionism” is a label introduced here. Fish was primarily a literature professor, and deconstruction is a literary method that the postmodernists developed for analyzing and breaking down texts. It’s what Fish is saying about deconstruction as a literary method here. Deconstruction, he says,

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

Again we have an epistemological theme. What we are saying is there is no such thing as “right.” If the deconstructionist or postmodernist critique of traditional epistemology is correct, then there is no such thing as right and wrong. And so, when we are interpreting pieces of text what we are *not* trying to do is figure out what the right interpretation is or what the true interpretation is. It’s just a story. We are just talking about the narratives. And when we are talking about stories that have been made up or narratives that have been made up,

we are not asking “Are these true?” because we know that they are simply stories that are just made up. Instead, what we are looking for from narratives is that they engage us and we find them interesting. We are looking for the person to tell us a good and interesting story. And so what Fish is arguing is that postmodernism is not about what is right, but rather about what is an interesting narrative. And the means literary interpretation is not about objective criteria: what is interesting is subjective and non-objective. So in Fish’s postmodernism, we’re just interested in subjective play primarily.

Other postmodernists take things in a darker direction. My next quotations are from Andrea Dworkin. Dworkin and her colleague in law made arguments for censoring pornography on postmodernist grounds. They argued that pornography is a kind of narrative, a story that portrays conflict, with males in a dominant role and females in a submissive role. As a result of the prevalence of pornography, males and females are constructed to have certain kinds of gender roles that are detrimental to females and serve to prop up the male-dominated patriarchal society that postmodernists think we have. So censorship of pornography was a legitimate position here.

But what I want to focus on in these two quotations is Dworkin’s claims about the nature of relationships between males and females. Because the language is very strong here and I am a delicate-souled person, I won’t actually read them out, but just have them flashed on the screen.

“The normal fuck by a normal man is taken to be an act of invasion and ownership undertaken in a mode of predation.”

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

Notice that Dworkin is defining individuals by their group membership in the first place. You are a male or you are a female. And the relationship between those two groups is one of conflict and oppression. Contrary to the modern claims about women’s empowerment and women’s liberty and that we are making progress toward women’s equality, the postmodern argument is that this is merely a good-news story—a cover story that masks the brutal truth of the matter which is that males are

primed and conditioned to dominate women. Contemporary narratives, including all of the pornographic narratives, reinforce that dominance narrative and prop up the continued oppression of women by males.

The next quotation is from Jean François Lyotard, a French postmodernist. He is the one who, in a book called *The Postmodern Condition*, came up with the label that came to be widely associated with the postmodern movement. He is also the one who came up with the theme of being incredulous toward any meta-narrative. But also in focusing on group membership being primary and conflict and oppression being dominant, take this quotation from the early 1990s:

“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 [problems] in the capitalist system to vanquished, less developed, or simply less resistant countries.”

We have a number of themes here. One is, on political grounds, that capitalism is a system that cynically says it’s in favor of liberty and equality. The capitalists can tell a good-news story about that—but what is really going on is the traditional Marxist story of oppression and exploitation.

What the capitalist countries have been able to do is take all of their conflict and exploitation and all the problems that developed from that, and export them to Third-World countries, i.e., to weaker countries such as Iraq. So capitalism’s pathologies are masked or hidden or swept under the international carpet, so to speak, and it’s the third world countries that are bearing the brunt of it. So what we then have is rich countries versus poor countries, or strong countries versus weaker countries. It’s those groups in conflict on an international scale.

So, it’s not simply males and females or members of different races. It’s different ethnic groups, different economic groups on a worldwide scale.

Also notice what Lyotard says about Saddam Hussein and that particular dictatorship. His situation is a constructed and imposed situation. It’s not that he made certain choices and that Iraqis made

certain choices. Rather, they are puppets being controlled by Western governments, by Western big companies. Their situation is something that's imposed on them. They are determined, constructed by the international political and economic environment that they find themselves in.

## Section 11 — Quotations from Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida, Clip 2

Michel Foucault—let's return to him in this next quotation. What he argues in this quotation is that there is, nonetheless, a place where we can see the true nature of Western society in a non-pretend kind of form, and that place is 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.”

What Foucault is arguing is that we can see prison as a microcosm of our society at large. And, of course, what you find in prison is the strong—the prison guards, those who are holding the weapons—and the weak, and those are the ones who are behind bars. There are those who have all of the power and those who are forced to follow. The social dynamic that gets played out in prison of one group versus another group, conflict and oppression, is simply a dominance of one group, brutally, over every aspect of the other group's lives. That is what a prison life is all about, and that is what our society in general is all about.

At the same time, Foucault points out that, even though prison is a brutal place, the kind of people who are attracted to prison work are those who like being in that kind of environment—who like having that power to be able to make other people do what they want to do and to see people chronically and consistently behind bars.

Yet there is, nonetheless, a happy, good news story, that the prison system tells. The story is that the prison system is all about “justice” and it is all about keeping society “safe.” So we empower these brutal

individuals and give them all of the power to do whatever they want to the prisoners. And we give them a story that justifies to them and everybody else their ability to exert power over other people.

So the argument is that, if we generalize that to Western, capitalist society, from a postmodern perspective, that society is an exploitative system. It is a brutal system, with the rich taking advantage of the poor, males taking advantage of women, a whites taking advantage of all of the other races, and so forth. But the capitalists, at the same time, are telling themselves everybody else that it is all about freedom, equality, justice, and so forth. "We are not oppressing anybody," so their story goes. They use a cover story that pretend-justifies, from a postmodern perspective, the brutality of the system.

Next, I want to move on to Jacques Derrida, another French Postmodernist, again speaking about deconstruction as Stanley Fish had spoken about deconstruction, but what is interesting here is that Derrida makes a connection from deconstruction as an *epistemological* method applied to narratives to a certain kind of *politics*:

"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*" [italics in the original].

What Derrida is saying is that, from his perspective, politics is the primary and important issue here. A kind of Marxist socialism or a Marxist egalitarian ethic emanating from that socialism. That was what got him interested in postmodernism and postmodernism's literary methods of deconstruction, which are the radical skepticism about there being such things like true narratives and our skepticism toward meta-narratives, and so forth. Politics drives his epistemological approach for strategic reasons. Of course, what is central to Marxism is group analysis, an environmental determinism, and analysis of a contemporary society that is marked by conflict, oppression, and exploitation. So, for Derrida, all of this is bundled in a package with a political agenda.

Now, what does this have to do with *education*? That will be main focus of our next unit, but I want to give you one more quotation from a literature professor who is a colleague of Stanley Fish's, Frank

Lentricchia. Lentricchia made the following observation in a book called *Criticism and Social Change*, where he speaks about postmodernism's political agenda and what this implies for the job of a postmodern teacher or a postmodern professor. What is the whole point here?

Postmodernism "seeks not to find the foundation and the conditions of truth but to exercise power for the purpose of social change."

I will pause there for a moment. Truth is out: we are not seeking truth. The job of a professor or a teacher is not to seek truth. That is the old story that there was God's truth or the scientific truth. Truth is out. Instead, we are interested in *power*. The postmodern argument really is a power struggle. And our job as educators, then, is to ourselves get power and to use it for the purpose of social change. That then is to say that politics is necessary here. Carrying on with the quotation from Lentricchia:

One's task as a professor is to help students "spot, confront, and work against the political horrors of one's time."

That is to say that your primary job as a teacher or professor is to be critical of the existing system. It is to help students realize that they live in a horrible, pathological system that is marked by power struggles in which the weaker are constantly oppressed, exploited, and taken advantage of by strong groups. Your job is to make students aware of this—and then cultivate in them the kind of compassion and identification with those oppressed and exploited groups—which will then make them into the people who will make the revolutionary effort necessary to overcome modern society and all of its institutional structures and bring forth a postmodern society.

## Section 12 — Problems from Marxism, Clip 1

In this next sub-unit I want to focus on postmodernism's connections to Marxism. Postmodernism is, among all of the movements that we've been looking at this semester, the most politicized, and it puts political front and center in a way that other philosophical systems of education do not.

My takeoff point will be two of the quotations I read at the end of the last sub-unit, one from Frank Lentricchia, arguing that the task of a

professor is just to help students focus on particular horrors of his or her times, that is to say, be critical of existing society. The job of the professor is not so much to focus on issues of truth but, rather, to exercise power in order to bring about social change.

Now, what are the horrors of the current time? Or from what perspective do we see current society as horrible? And if we are interested in exercising power rather than truth, putting aside truth issues, we are focusing merely on power, then how do we want to exercise power? If we are talking about social change, what kind of social change do we want to bring out? What we have then is the professor as a kind of political activist in the classroom, and that view is obviously going to transform the nature of education.

The other quotation I want to touch base with once again is the one from Jacques Derrida, arguing as a postmodernist, that one of the things that motivated him to do all of the epistemological and linguistic work, and the deconstructive methods that he applied to literary texts, comes out of Marxism, as he put it, a certain spirit of Marxism. So what is this spirit of Marxism that is motivating Derrida? In what way is it a *spirit* of Marxism, not necessarily actual historical Marxism? Or what Marxism with some variations do postmodernists educators want to put in practice?

So, for the purpose of answering those questions, I want to do a thumbnail history of Marxism. While postmodernism does have things to say about human nature, ethics, values, and epistemology, and it is anti-metaphysical in some ways—the history of Marxism in both theory and practice in the century leading up to postmodernism is an important part of the story.

So I have on the whiteboard here a timeline. We will go back to 1850 and start the story somewhere around there, and we'll bring the story up to the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

1850 is not too arbitrary, as we can single out a date two years earlier, 1848, which is the year that Marx and Engels jointly publish *The Communist Manifesto*. This book is, as a manifesto should be, a rallying cry for certain segments of the political Left, particularly the far-left, to mount a revolution, a worker's revolution, in the name of a species of socialism, communism.

Marx also worked out any number of more economic treatises and political treatises. He did a quasi-sociological work and was very engaged with ongoing and current events, and interpreted them in the light of his system and so forth. And in his position—writing primarily from England, being transplanted from Germany, with England then being the heart of the advanced, industrial capitalism—Marx sees England as a laboratory in which history is being played out. He is in a position, then, as a politically- and economically-engaged social scientist to make certain predictions about how capitalism is going to play out.

Now the argument that the Marxists are making is that capitalism is, of course, an evil system: it's an exploitative system, it's a zero-sum system. And if you characterize the system that way, then there are certain predictions that one can make about the logic of capitalism and how it is going to play out.

So, farther over to the left on the board, I have a miniaturized table. What we have in capitalism, according to Marxism, is the bourgeoisie in economic competition with the proletariat. That is to say, those who own property compete with those who work for those who have property are in competition. The bourgeoisie are the rich and own all of the property, and the proletariat are the poor members of the working class. They have to sell their wages for subsistence labor. Also in capitalism is a nascent middle-class that comes into existence, but Marxism has a logical prediction for how that is going to play out.

Now, if we have a rich class and a poor class engaged in zero-sum competition with each other, then you have winners and losers. Those who lose in economic competition get forced into the lower class. Those who win the economic competition are in a position to become rich and powerful. And the Marxist argument is that, as successive rounds of competition carry on, what should happen is that increasing numbers of people will be forced into poverty.

Then smaller numbers of people emerge victorious in the zero-sum competition and get to the top of the heap. The rich and the poor are engaged in economic competition with each other—but also those within the class of the bourgeoisie, i.e., those who own property, are engaged in economic competition with each other. Some of those lose in the competition; they are forced down to the middle-class or even into the class of the poor. And those who are more ruthlessly successful in that



economic competition amass greater and greater amounts of economic wealth and power.

What we should find, eventually, is a small group of very wealthy people at the top of the economic heap and a large group of very poor people at the bottom of the economic heap.

What about the middle-class? The middle-class, from the Marxist perspective, is an unstable class. It is brought about by capitalism. Capitalism does generate some goods, but the zero-sum competition applies also to members of the middle-class. Once one loses, one loses one's property and is forced into the poor class. Some small number of the middle-class will succeed in clawing their way up into the rich class, but nonetheless, what we should find overtime is that zero-sum competition forces people either up into the rich class or into the poor class, and so we should have a declining middle-class.

In summary, what we then have is a Marxist analysis of capitalist society that leads to three fairly definite predictions here. These predictions are worked out by the middle part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Marxist theory. Part of Marxist political activism is simply waiting for the logic of capitalism inextricably to work its way out in this particular form.

Their hope and prediction is that, once you have a very small number of people in the rich class and a large number of people in the poor class, the poor people will become increasingly desperate and develop a class consciousness. They will rise up in revolution and overthrow the rich class.

Now, the problem was that, by the time we go across a couple of generations here—it is getting now to the 1870s, the 1880s, the 1890s, the 1900s, and so forth—is that it does *not* seem that the poor are becoming revolutionary. There is some historical unrest here, some clashes there. But we don't find the great proletarian class consciousness developing, and we don't find any mass revolutionary movements. That is very unsettling from the classic Marxist perspective.

Also, if we are attending to and crunching the numbers and generating the statistics, as we should be doing as good social scientists, by the time we get well into the 1900s, even with things like the World War I

and the Great Depression and the recovery, what we find is that the actual results of the developed of capitalism do not seem to be going in the direction that Marx predicted.

## Section 13 — Problems from Marxism, Clip 2

First, instead of an *increasing* number of poor people in the population of the capitalistic society, what seems to be happening is the number of people who are living in poverty is *smaller*. People are acquiring bigger houses, access to entertainment, more modes of transportation, their clothes are better, they are living longer, and so forth. This is not to say that by the 1900s the problem of poverty has been solved. But poverty by the time we get to the 1900s is not as bad as poverty in 1850, and in 1850 it was not as bad as poverty was in 1800. The percentage of people living in poverty is going down, and that's a problem as it is going in the opposite direction from Marx's prediction.

Second, the middle class is not being squeezed out. Instead, what happens is the number of middle class people is going up dramatically. People who were formerly in the poor class are rising to the middle class. And even what counts as middle class is a rising standard of living as decades go on as well.

Third, when we look at the number of rich people, by whatever standard of rich we want to use, we find also that the number of rich people in England, France, in parts of Germany and certainly in the United States—is going up, and going up dramatically.

This is problematic from the Marxist perspective, because if we take Marxism as a *realist* or *scientific* account of the way the world works and we are willing to put it into the *empirical* test based on the *data*, then these results are devastating for the classical Marxist model. Because what we have are three fairly definite predictions—and all of those predictions turned out to be false.

As the 1900s go on, when Marxists are looking at how actual Western capitalist or semi-capitalist countries are working out, it seems that the actual results are not going in the direction the model predicted. That causes an intellectual crisis: What is wrong with the model? Why isn't history conforming to the theory? Do we need to adjust the model? Did we miss something of significance? And so forth. So by the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a rethinking that is going on among the far Left

thinkers. The question is: Why is capitalism not developing along Marxist lines?

Now, the Marxists are anti-capitalists, so part of the story is their reaction to how the capitalist countries developed. But they are also pro-socialists, and by the time we get into the second and third decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century they were inspired by the revolution in Marx's name in the Soviet Union. Czarist Russia is transformed into Communist Russia. As the decades go on, the same thing occurs in China and in other parts of Southeast Asia. There are other nascent communist movements that are becoming significantly powerful around the world as well. So even if, as Marxists, we are disappointed in the developments within capitalism, we can nonetheless be inspired by the developments of various socialist revolutions in other parts of the world.

The problem is that by the time we get to 1950, that particular way of thinking about things is also dealt some problematic blows.

1956 is a significant year for the development of Marxism, as a pair of major events happened in 1956. One was that the then-premier of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, made a semi-secret speech announcing, semi-publicly, that the allegations about the horrors of extermination and genocide in the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin were in fact true.

This is extraordinarily problematic because obviously from much of this time period there were people in the Western nations, the United States and Britain and so forth, arguing that things were very bad in the Soviet Union, economically, but also in terms of its record on human rights. There were any number of dissidents who had been killed and tortured. The existence of concentration camps in Siberia. A lot of that could be dismissed as simply Western propaganda, as capitalism's propaganda trying to besmirch the good name of communism, which, from the Marxist perspective, must be a system that cares about its people, as opposed to the capitalist system which is exploitative.

So, to have the leader of the flagship nation for Communism, the Soviet Union, announce that the nation was guilty of crimes against humanity, exterminating tens of millions of its own people—that is a devastating blow for people who believe in the rightness and justice of the Marxist cause.

Also, by 1956 there was worldwide television. Television is the new medium of the time, and the fact that images could now be broadcast around the world relatively easily meant that there was actually visual evidence for some of the internal practices that the Soviet Union had been engaging in. It wasn't simply a matter of second-hand reports.

After WWII, much of Europe is partitioned between a western and eastern Europe. The West is open to the Allies, England, France, America, and so on, and much of Eastern Europe is behind the Iron Curtain, as it is called. Most of the Eastern European countries are satellite nations under the control of the Soviet Union.

What happens in 1956—again, the banner year—is a major event in Hungary. In Hungary there is a great deal of unrest among workers who are finding that their economic livelihood is not that good. Students are chafing under the heel, the oppressive heel as they feel, of the Soviet Union and the domestic Communist Party regime. There is some of demonstration and unrest, but the response of the Soviet Union was to quite harshly militaristically to send in the troops and the tanks, to kill various people on the street, to roundup leaders, and to take them in for questioning, torture, and outright killing.

And the key point is that a significant amount of this is captured on television and broadcast for Western audiences. The problem for Marxism is that the events in Hungary seems to be a blow for the claims that socialism is going to be a much more *humane* system compared to capitalism. We don't find in capitalist nations any degree of brutality on that scale being directed against its own people.

So, what we have then, is a question: Why is socialism also not working out the way the Marxist model predicted? Marxism argued that capitalism would be exploitative, that it would be ruthlessly devastating to the poor class, and that it would develop a certain population demographics. But it seems that capitalism is going in the exact opposite direction: the poorer are not getting poorer, and the richer are getting richer. Also the middle classes are getting richer, and the poorer are getting richer.

And while there are moral problems in capitalist nations, nonetheless, it seems to be progressing as opposed to regressing as Marxist would say. Socialism, on the other hand, according to classical Marxism is to be a humane system that cares about its people and that delivers the goods,

and does so better than capitalism. But when we actually look at the practice in the Marxist-inspired nations, we find economic deprivation and the brutal crushing of people's basic human rights.

The point is that by the time we get to the 1950s, we are about one century after *The Communist Manifesto*. We have a whole century of actual, empirical, social-scientific evidence to go on, and that evidence is adding up to a fairly devastating blow to Marxism and to those who are still believers in the Marxist project.

## Section 14 — Problems from Marxism, Clip 3

What does this mean for postmodernism? One crucial thing here is to integrate the biographical dates of the leading postmodern thinkers. Postmodernism is a movement that sweeps certain parts of the humanities and the social sciences by the time we get into the third quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its educational implications are to be felt more significantly in the 1980s on to the 2000s. But what I want argue that the 1950s a key, formative decade for many of the leading postmodern strategists. Here, the biography becomes important.

Take Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and add American postmodernists Richard Rorty. A striking fact is that, by the 1950s, all of these men are in their 20s and early 30s. That is to say, all of them were born in an interesting seven-year span from about 1926 or so to about 1931 or so. And what that means is by the time we get to the 1950s, all of them are in the prime of their intellectual youth. That is to say, they are in graduate school, finishing up their doctoral degrees, and launching themselves in their intellectual careers. What people think, decide, and strategize in their 20s and early 30s is absolutely crucial here. What we have then is a group of people who—we know from hindsight—became the leaders of the postmodern intellectual movement.

Now, all four of those individuals, Foucault, Rorty, Lyotard, Derrida: another striking fact is that all four of them got their PhDs degrees in Philosophy. They are very well informed, philosophically speaking. They get their degrees at very good institutions, so they are up to speed on the latest in epistemology, metaphysics, and so forth. All of them are well versed on epistemological issues, the neo-Pragmatic skepticism, the failures of Positivism and Logical Positivism in the United States. All

of them are well versed in the skeptical trends and know the relativistic epistemological transition occurring in the philosophical world. One of the things that is characteristic of postmodernism is a relativized skepticism about meta-narratives, about our ability to achieve truth, and about the power of reason to come to know an independent world. And so, by the time we get to the 1950s, all four of these individuals come to believe that this is our epistemological predicament.

The other biographical point that is important here is the connection to Marxism. All four of those individuals and most of the other leading postmodernists are advocates of fairly far-left politics. All of them are socialists in one degree or other. Three of the four, Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault were Marxists. Foucault was a member of the French Communist Party in the early 1950s. Derrida had not joined the Communist Party, but he hung around and published in journals that were communist-friendly. Lyotard was also worked with Marxist groups. The American, Richard Rorty, is not a Marxist, but he nonetheless is a strong social-democrat and stakes out of position at the far end of the social-democratic political spectrum as well.

So, the point is that here we have not only four individuals who become postmodernism's leading strategists and who are epistemologically well informed, getting their PhDs degrees in philosophy from leading universities—but also four individuals who, as young men, are committed to strongly socialist analyses of society. One is more social-democratic politically, the others are much more explicitly Marxist in their orientation.

So the argument, then, is that a crisis is going on politically with the classically-Marxist model of what's going on in the Soviet Union and the other leading socialist countries, as well as how things should be playing out in the United States and the leading capitalist nations. This crisis of the politically-left way of thinking is going in the 1950s, and it leads to the need for a re-strategization. This political crisis combines with an epistemological crisis: the realization that reason is not going to work, that there is no such thing as truth. The new postmodernism is the marriage of those two: a skeptical, relativized epistemology and the 1950s crisis within a socialist way of thinking gives birth to postmodernism as a movement.

What we should find is over the course of the 1960s is that these leading figures establish themselves. Foucault becomes a big name by

the time we get to the 1960s. Derrida burst on to the scene both in France and in the United States by the time we get to the mid-to-late 1960s. Richard Rorty in the United States becomes a big name in philosophy and in social-democratic thinking circles. By the time we get to the 1960s, well into the 1970s, the same is true for Lyotard, who came up with the label "postmodern." It comes from his book *The Postmodern Condition*. The point of being skeptical about meta-narratives also is a Lyotardian phrase.

These individuals establish themselves as the leading strategists for postmodernism. They are the one who take the new epistemology and rework the political themes. This is what gets played into education. We start to see postmodernism in education theory and practice by the time we get to the late 1970s on into the 1980s, and a generation it is still with us.

## Section 15 — Skeptical Relativistic Rhetoric Against Modern Society, Clip 1

So, the next thing that comes out of the leading postmodern strategists in the late 1950s and early 1960s is a broad agreement on a set of themes. One important theme I will take from Lyotard, and that is: *There are no meta-narratives*. There are no meta-narratives that are true, that are right, or that can be justified, and we shouldn't be trying for meta-narratives. We do tell stories, but the idea of a meta-narrative is a grand, overarching story of all stories that captures all of the essential truths about the world.

From the postmodern perspective, two things lead to this conclusion. One comes out of developments within philosophy, epistemology particularly, the analyses of science, of scientific methods of observation, of reason, linguistics, and so forth. The argument that most of the leading postmodernists are agreeing upon and many in philosophy more generally by the time we get to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a kind of skepticism about the power of language to capture reality, about reason as a competent tool, about science as the one ultimate, true picture of the universe, and so forth. So, a kind of skeptical relativizing of narratives or stories is something that broadly is agreed upon.

Now, another important theme is the crisis of Marxism, because Marxism is a grand meta-narrative that bills itself as a true story of the way the world works, one that ultimately explain everything. So if we adopt the Marxist framework, ultimately, the world should play out according to Marxism. But it is also a system that many people feel to be an idealistic system, and so they invest themselves totally in it. And if we then have an intellectual system that failed and seems to have caused an intellectual crisis as well as a crisis of identity for people who invested themselves in it—then will be a psychological impetus toward the idea that *any* belief system is going to fail. So, again, we are in a position of arguing that are no meta-narratives.

A second major point is that all four of these thinkers agree broadly that Marxism did capture rightly certain accounts of the way the world works. And so the claim is going to be that Marxism is not necessarily, literally, exactly, and precisely right—but that the spirit of Marxism is essentially right. We have to use this “*essentially*” language a little ironically since we are speaking are postmodernists, but it’s essentially right about two things, and they are: (1) that we have zero-sum conflict, that is to say, that there are groups of individuals engaged in conflict where there is a winner and there is a loser, and (2) that the world is generated by a class-based or a group-based conflict. So, we will retain from Marxism the idea that the world is governed by conflict, a conflict among the group dimensions or collectivized dimensions and that it is a zero-sum conflict, that there is no happy ever after, win-win, and progressive solution to society’s problems.

A third point also emerges. This is where the postmodernists become more original. Postmoderns revise Marxism’s intellectual framework in the light of earlier historical developments and failures. While Marx was essentially right, they believe, the weakness of Marxism was in characterizing the groups exclusively or primarily along economic lines. Not everything can be explained in terms of one dimension. The economic dimension was being made fundamental in Marxism and everything else was derivative. But we cannot just let everything be deduced from or let the logical necessity be worked out from that one basic, necessary, fundamental.

So what we as postmoderns need to do is to take the zero-sum conflict and broaden it. More than a one-dimensional group conflict is going on within modern capitalist-liberal-democratic society, and we should not



necessarily going to give primacy to economic groups. We need to focus more on what I am going to call splinter groups. We are not going to see everything in terms of one monolithic Marxist framework, as this economic group versus that economic group. Instead, we have a multi-dimensional battleground, and we are not going to give precedence to any one of those battlegrounds. That's historically contingent depending on the development of any given society.

What we have are groups that are in part based on economic class. The Marxists are right on that. But it is also a conflict among *genders*: males and females—contrary to the modernist account—are also in zero-sum conflict with each other. The gender wars take a certain turn with postmodernism. We also have *racial* groups operative in society: they are composed of individuals whose identities are formed in terms of racial groups. The different racial groups are, again, in zero-sum conflicts with each other. We also have different *ethnicities* in conflict with each other.

What else can we add to the list here? We can argue also that, with respect to *sexuality*, traditionally in modern society there is one proper and approved form of sexuality—heterosexuality within the confines of marriage. We have a certain kind of sexual lifestyle dominating and in conflict with various alternative kinds of sexualities.

Also, there will an *environmental* version. We can argue, as the postmoderns do, that the human species in conflict with various other species or even with the environment itself. There is zero-sum conflict advancing humans at the expense of all of the other organisms, and that is characteristic of modernism's society.

From the postmodern perspective, we should not privilege any one of these dimensions. One of the Marxism's weaknesses that it said it could explain everything in terms of economic class. This is the reason why the Marxist model led to a crisis: it did not accurately explain the development of societies in the modern world because it made derivative or secondary or didn't pay sufficient attention to all of the other dimensions of conflict that are operative in society. It privileged the economic conflict.

Marxism was also trying to construct a meta-narrative that it could explain everything in terms of one that one dimension. Instead, there is

no such thing as a necessary development. There is no necessity that any one of these dimensions of conflict is going to get precedence. Different societies can have different social constitutions and different conflict dynamics working themselves out.

## Section 16 — Skeptical Relativistic Rhetoric Against Modern Society, Clip 2

As a result, when we're critiquing modern society, what we need to do is *not* hold out hope that the Marxist version of socialism is going to come someday. We're still crushed by the failure of Marxism to work its way out and by the fact that the capitalist societies still seem to be going along in a quasi-progressive direction. We need to abandon our predictions that socialism is in the future. We need to realize there is probably never going to be a happily-ever-after society. Group conflicts are likely to go on along indefinitely.

Instead, we need to focus our efforts *critically*, that is to say, negatively against contemporary society, critiquing it, making people aware of these conflicts that are going on all around them and undermining the modernist, self-congratulatory story about making progress in any one of these areas. We need to focus on a critique of all dimensions of modern society. Modern society is not simply characterized by a set of economic arrangements. It is also characterized by gender dynamics, by sexual dynamics, by political dynamics, by linguist dynamics, by a relationship between us and other environment species, and so forth. Modern society as a multi-dimensional society is what we as postmodernists are against in all of its manifestations, and we're focusing our efforts on critiquing those in totalistic fashion as much as possible.

The way modern society works is that it privileges *some* groups at the expense of other groups. The way modern society actually has played out—against its rhetoric of expanding liberty and equality for all—is that it's white people who are at the top of the heap, and anybody who is non-white is at the bottom of the heap or marginalized from the main streams of wealth and power. It's males who are increasingly at the top of the heap, and it's increasingly and continually females who are marginalized or pushed down the hierarchy. People of Anglo-Saxon and Protestant backgrounds have become privileged, and anybody who doesn't fit the dominant WASP Protestant model is marginalized as well.

This model also privileges a heterosexuality. It says that males and females should be in monogamist marital relationships. That's the proper and proved form of sexual behavior, so various alternative sexualities including homosexuality get marginalized. And we also have privileged ourselves. We say that we human beings are the most important species. We advance our interests and, from an environmental angle, we see all other species are merely commodities for our use. We exterminate them, use them, and enslave them however we want.

So what we should recognize, if we focus on the point about the splinter groups, is that all of these groups are operative. For some people, their being white is more important or their sexuality is more important or their Protestant religion is more important. So it's not necessarily the case that in any given society, what is going on in the United States is exactly the same of what's going on in Germany or Japan and so forth. Which of these conflicts is more prevalent in any given society, in any given time, is a historically-contingent matter. But nonetheless, broadly speaking, what we do have is groups in various coalitions dominating other groups in coalitions.

So what we postmodernists need to do is recognize that this dynamic is in place and identify ourselves with the historically-oppressed groups. We should advocate for them and try to bring them more to a position of equality. But at the same time, we need to be more critical of those in the privileged groups and critical of the kinds of narratives that give precedence to these people or seem to be privileging accounts that are self-congratulatory or trying to tell good news stories about modern society that only play up the achievements of people in these particular groups.

That means that we are making various theoretical adjustments to the Marxist model. We retain the zero-sum issue, the conflict model, the power struggle issues, and the group analyses. We do, however, broaden it. We do not claim that there is one story that fits all societies in terms of all of their developments. We adapt the rhetorical battle depending on the society that we find ourselves in. We look at smaller sub-divisions of the human species, we abandon the idealism that came along with Marxism, and we devote ourselves to critiquing the negative elements of the modernist project. And hopefully, through that critique, we pave the way for a postmodern future.

## Section 17 — Skeptical Relativistic Rhetoric Against Modern Society, Clip 3

I now want to summarize all of this historical story into a set of philosophical themes. There are about a half-dozen core themes that postmodernism advances, which form a narrative background with its philosophical approach. So I have a table over to the left side of the board here that has a comprehensive opposition between the modern framework and the postmodern framework.

Modernism, if we boil it down to half-dozen themes, believes in this set of claims:

1. The modernists believe that there are *objective* truths and that it's possible for us to acquire knowledge of them by observation, reasoning, and, in the difficult cases, a fully sophisticated scientific method. But we can arrive at objective truths about the world.
2. Modernists also believe that human reason is *universal*: everybody has this capacity, and we're all living in the same world, so through a process of discovery, debate, discussion, and publication, we should all be able to agree upon a set of universal truths about the way the world works, including moral truths and political truths about human rights.
3. The modernists emphasize *individualism*—that individuals have their own lives to live and their own pursuit of happiness. And that leads to a number of things that we should be concerned with as it pertains to the liberty of the individual. And so, a progressive emancipation of all of the human population is an important modernist goal.
4. Modernists believe that *justice* is an objective, definable, universal principle and that we should socially be able to enact a legal system and political system that leads to justice.
5. And they put an emphasis on *equality*, particularly against the feudal structure that divided people into groups and classes and castes based on sexuality, religion, or other dimensions. So taking seriously those three beliefs [individualism, justice, equality] is important from the modernist's perspective.

6. *Capitalism* as an economic system leaves individuals free to run their own lives economically, to control their own property, and it is the dominant economic system of the modern world.
7. Also, *progress* is an ideal. Modernists optimistically believe that it is possible for us, by taking seriously observation, reason, individualism, and institutionalizing all of these socially, to solve all of the world's problems. Over the course of time humans can progress and achieve happiness in their lives.

These are the characteristic themes of the modern narrative.

But from the postmodern perspective, all of them are false and unrealizable. Maybe it's not correct to call them "false"—but we should say that the claims are not justifiable and don't make any sense. Instead, the postmodernists argue that what we take to be truth is a kind of *socially-subjective projection* onto the world. Rather than there being one ultimate, universal set of truths, all truths are partial. They are not even, properly speaking, "truths." We should look at all claims as being *relative* claims, relative to the group or to those living figures within the group that are making the claims. Individuals are not the operative unit here. Individuals are *molded* and *constructed* by their cultural heritage, their linguistic backgrounds, and so forth. And so, what we should have is various kinds of group orientations or *collectivism* as our operating framework.

We don't believe in liberty, justice, or equality. Instead, the truth about the world is that the world is governed by *power*. It's not a matter of justice; it's a matter of *conflict*. And it is likely always going to be the case that there is *inequality*: power is unevenly distributed, so in the conflict the strong will to advance at the expense of the weak, thus perpetuating the inequalities.

Postmodernists are *hostile to capitalism* as a system. Most of them, when young, came to believe in socialism as the proper system. But there is a chastening that has occurred, so what remains is a commitment to the spirit of socialism. But the way it works is that most postmodernists don't believe that anymore socialism is going to happen or that it's a historical necessity. Instead, to use Kantian language here, socialism functions as a kind of regulative ideal. That is to say, it's not something that is empirically real or that we can argue has to be a

historical necessity or that's factually correct. But, nonetheless, it functions in our thinking as a set of principles that regulate our thinking. The egalitarianism and so on are ideals that we, as postmodernists, think should be brought about.

And, finally, as *critical* theorists we are against the progress belief and the sunny-skies-unlimited-optimism that is characteristic of the modern world. What we find in postmodernism—partly as an intellectual attitude but certainly as an emotional attitude as well—is a strong tendency toward *pessimism* and *cynicism*.

The modern world tells a lot of good-news stories about itself. It prides itself on certain accomplishments: liberty, equality, and so on. The postmodernist's perspective is that we should see all such stories as rhetorical devices that strong groups use in the power struggle to position themselves and advance their groups at the expense of others. And so our job as postmodernist critical thinkers is to be *suspicious* about the cover story and to *tear off its masks* to realize that it is a rhetorical device. And we should always look for the underlying social reality—the darker story about power conflicts, about groups using any tools, including rhetorical and philosophical tools, to advance their interests at the expense of other groups. That darkness is characteristically the center of gravity for postmodernism.

What we will do next is turn to education more directly and look at some of postmodernism's educational theorists and how their theory plays out in educational practice.

## Section 18 — Henry Giroux on Education

I want now to turn to postmodernism in education and connect the more theoretical, philosophical, historical material on postmodernism with the postmodern educator's notion of how the practice should go.

I will read some quotations with interspersed commentary from Henry Giroux, who, in the American context, is one of the leading postmodern theorists. Giroux connects the abstract themes of postmodernism with concrete educational practice. Giroux draws a great deal on Paulo Freire, another leading postmodern theorist, but, from the American context, Giroux's language is more accessible than that of many other postmodern educational theorists.

From an essay entitled "Border Pedagogy as Postmodernist Resistance", here is the first quotation. Giroux is well-informed and situates postmodernism as an intellectual movement against the other mainstream philosophical movements. In the language of this course in philosophy of education there is Idealism, a more religion-friendly movement and Realism, a more modern and scientific-friendly movement. Giroux positions postmodernism against both of them in the following quotation:

"Postmodernism radicalizes the emancipatory possibilities of teaching and learning as a part of a wider struggle for democratic public life and critical citizenship. It does this by refusing forms of knowledge and pedagogy wrapped in the legitimizing discourse of the sacred and the priestly..."

Let's pause there. That is to say, we are going to reject Idealistic or religion-friendly ("sacred" and "priestly") forms of philosophical legitimation for our practices.

Picking up the quotation again:

"... its rejecting universal reason as a fundamental for human affairs,"

Let's pause again here. "Universal reason" is the Realist or modern, scientific framework: postmodernists reject the universal reason claim.

Picking up the quotation again:

"claiming that all narratives are partial; and performing a critical reading on all scientific, cultural, and social texts as historical and political constructions."

To translate that language: all stories, scientific stories, cultural stories, and so forth are social construction by the social group within which they are generated. Our job, as postmodernists, is to be critical of them, to defuse the rhetorical masks, to look for the deeper story, and so forth. And we have the claim also about narrative being partial. There is no such thing as a full, whole, complete story.

Next quotation from Giroux. He is criticizing the modern world and its framework, despite all of its rhetoric about being inclusive and extending liberty and equality for all. The argument is that we take all

of the groups that are not white, not male, not Anglo-Saxon Protestants, and so forth—and we relegate them to an alien Other group and then subordinate them.

Next we have is a claim about what the modern world does to those other groups:

“Within the discourse of modernity, the Other not only sometimes ceases to be a historical agent, but is often defined within totalizing and universalistic theories that create a transcendental rational, white, male, Eurocentric subject that occupies the centers of power, while simultaneously appearing to exist outside time and space.”

Let’s pause again. In the modern perspective: modern philosophy and modern intellectual constructs are all about taking the white, male, Eurocentric type of life and making that the one, universal, right way of being. They therefore subordinate all non-white, non-male, non-Eurocentric ways of being. Picking up the quotation again,

“Read against this Eurocentric transcendental subject, the Other is shown to lack any redeeming community traditions, collective voice, or historical weight—and is reduced to the imagery of the colonizer.”

The next quotation will be a postmodern analysis of modern education and modern cultural life. What modern education and culture try to do is make everybody who isn’t white into a white person, everybody who isn’t male into a male person, everybody who is not heterosexual into a heterosexual. It tries to take all of these different groups and assimilate them to the dominant, white, male, Eurocentric, heterosexual model. And so, what modern education does is cause people who are not fitting into that model to give up their identity.

“Moreover, students who have to disavow their own racial heritage in order to succeed are ... being positioned to accept subject positions that are the source of power for a white, dominant culture.”

That quotation focuses on racial issues, but the argument here is that whites hold all of the power and that they force people who aren’t white to give up their own racial identities and to act white or to internalize white ways of thinking if they are going to succeed in the white world.



Next quotation, then, about what the postmodernist educator then must do, which is to oppose that tendency of modernism to try to assimilate everybody to the white, male way of thinking:

“For those designated as Others need to both reclaim and remake their own histories, voices, and visions as part of a wider struggle to change those material and social relations that deny radical pluralism ...”

So the truth about the world is that there are all of these different groups that are incommensurate with each other. There is no right way of grouping, so we should not try to assimilate. Instead, we should affirm all of the students’ different group identities and, as educators, help students to reclaim or re-identify themselves with their own racial, ethnic, gender, and sexuality groups and encourage their development as members of those groups to which they properly belong.

What this also means is that we first will need to attend to the *teachers* who will be teaching the students. We need to remake the teachers who are coming into the education program, particularly teachers who, by the time they get to us as professors of education, have already been raised in modern society and assimilated and taught explicitly or even implicitly and have probably internalized the notion of the white-male-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant as the proper way of being.

So we need to focus on teacher reeducation as well.

“This suggests that to the degree that teachers make the construction of their own voices, histories, and ideologies problematic they become more attentive to Otherness as a deeply political and pedagogical issue.”

But most teachers in contemporary society are white, most of them come from Anglo-Saxon background, and most of them have been conditioned to think in terms of liberal capitalism and modern society. We need to teach them that that way of thinking is problematic.

They need to be taught not to think of themselves as training people to be cogs in the modern capitalist machine. They must become self-reflectively critical of their own upbringing and their own identities. To the extent that they do so, that will make them into teachers who are more sensitive to other groups and other ways of thinking—non-white ways of thinking about things, non-human-centered ways of thinking

about things, non-heterosexual ways of thinking about things, and so on.

## Section 19 — Postmodern Education: Teacher Training

The first thing we need to do as postmodern intellectuals concerned with education is to transform the teachers. The teachers are going to be the field workers, the cultural workers who will go forth into the schools and do the job of culturally transforming the next generation of students.

I have a contemporary example, as it happens, while we're shooting this video, in the 2010 academic year. One of the national debates in education focuses on the University of Minnesota, where the School of Education there apparently has a fairly strong contingent of postmodernists. They are putting forth a proposal that will require all teachers who are to be certified by the University of Minnesota and get their license to teach in the state of Minnesota to, in effect, sign on to a postmodern intellectual framework. The University of Minnesota in Twin Cities, the campus in question, empowered a Race, Culture, Class, and Gender Task Group in the College of Education and Human Development. Its report to the University argues that teacher candidates must argue that the modernist project—the language used is “The American Dream”—must be rejected if a student is to be recommended for the license that is required by the Minnesota Board of Teaching.

The document speaks of the “myth of meritocracy” in the United States. Of course, that is the modern story—the idea that if we free individuals and treat people as individuals and eliminate legal obstacles—then with encouragement and freedom anybody can achieve his or her own dream, achieve happiness. It's the modern story that America is the land of opportunity open to people of all races, creeds, sexes, and so forth.

But all of that, from the postmodern perspective of course, is a self-perpetuating myth for the powers-that-be in the United States. So the University of Minnesota proposal will require that teachers take a self-critical attitude toward their own cultural heritage, particularly if their

cultural heritage is that of mainstream white people, nice middle-class people raised in the United States.

One person quoted in the news story says:

“As an Anglo teacher, I struggle to quiet voices from my own farm family, echoing as always from some unstated standard ... how can we untangle our own deeply entrenched assumptions?”

So part of postmodern teacher training then, particularly for Anglo teachers, will be to focus on critiquing the unstated assumptions and the ways in which we Anglos have been molded by our background. Then we will be able to take a critical perspective on those assumptions.

Part of teacher training will also be to demonstrate proper compassion and understanding for all of the other groups their students belong to. The document goes on to state:

“Teachers must show that they understand ... many groups are typically not included within America’s celebrated cultural identity and that such exclusion is frequently a result of dissimilarities in power and influence.”

Teachers have to be aware that there are all of these other groups out there that are excluded from the centers of power--and that the centers of power want to keep them excluded. Our job is to be sensitive to the plight of all of those other groups and to recognize that they are marginalized and excluded by those centers of power.

“In particular, aspiring teachers must be able 'to explain how institutional racism works in schools.'”

Again, it may not seem that American society has institutionalized racism. It might seem that most administrators and teachers are not racists and do not teach in racist fashion. Nonetheless, a post-modernist should recognize that this is just a cover story. If you strip off the good-news mask that current educational institutions tell, you’ll find that deeply institutionalized racism is, in fact, the reality of the way teachers think and teach, the way administrators think and administer, the way social dynamics work out in communities, and so forth.

Also, we’ll have to show that teachers are able to recognize

“the history of demands for assimilation to white, middle-class, Christian meanings and values, (and) the history of white racism, with special focus on the current colorblind ideology.”

This culture and its schools of education typically claim to be “colorblind.” We postmoderns have to rip off that mask to understand that what is really going on is an attempt to assimilate the next generation of teachers into white, middle-class, Christian values so they will then go on and teach the next generation to assimilate.

All of that is what we must overcome. The first step is for us, as professors of education, to train the next generation of teachers to recognize critically that that is *not* what they should be doing and to make them sensitive to that particular fact.

## Section 20 — Postmodern Education: Literature

I want to turn to three elements of the curriculum. I’ve mentioned how postmodernists will recast teacher training. Now suppose we that have trained the appropriate kind of teachers and we send them forth into the schools. How will they then focus their efforts? There will be many issues in an ongoing multi-dimensional curricular battle and methodological battle. I want to focus on three of the contemporary battlegrounds where postmodernism has had a fairly high profile in transforming—or at least in establishing for itself a place in—the curriculum.

One of the areas is literature and reading.

The modernists will argue that, if we look at what is called the Western canon of literature, what we should be doing as educators is exposing our students to the best of the historical literature. If we want students to become classically- and contemporarily-educated people, then we should ensure that they become familiar with Homer, Aristotle, Cicero, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Herman Melville, and so forth.

What the postmodernists will argue is that canon of great books or classic literature is exclusively or mostly written by males, white people, and those who are Eurocentric or heavily influenced by the Eurocentric. So the canon is not really privileging works that are in fact objectively and universally great. Rather, it privileges a set of literary texts that white male Europeans think are good texts. And the canon therefore

doing excludes all other texts that are female texts, non-white texts, and those that are come from different ethnic and religious backgrounds.

What we should be doing is *deconstructing* the Eurocentric texts in the canon to show their flaws or weaknesses and that they are used to prop up a certain way of thinking. What we should also be doing, aside from de-emphasizing and deconstructing those texts, is making sure that we have equal representation of books that are not written by white people, not written by males, not written by people who are Christians, and so forth.

What we should pushing for—if not necessarily an explicit affirmative action quota system for literature—is nonetheless a critical stance to the canon of white, male, Eurocentric texts and arguing for more representation of non-white, non-male, and so forth texts in the literature.

The so-called literature wars of the last century in large part have been given impetus by a postmodern stance.

## Section 21 — Postmodern Education: History

History is another major battleground. Here the postmodernists argue that there is no such thing as objective history, there is no such thing as impartial history, and there is no such thing as one history that should be taught to all students universally.

Instead, there are a number of groups out there, each with their own histories. So, rather than saying here is one history curriculum, we should have multiple historical curricula—for example, one curriculum for white students, one curriculum for black students, one history that is appropriate for male students, one history curriculum that plays up the achievement of female students. We should not have a history that is self-congratulatory for Christians, but rather a curriculum that makes room for Islam and all of the other religions as well.

Postmodernists will also argue that we should be aware that history is a rhetorical tool. History is always written by the winners, and the winners always play up their side of the story and demonize the side that lost. And of course the way it has worked historically from the postmodernist perspective is that whites, Europeans, and males

typically have won these battles, so what we have in history is a rhetorical story that plays up the achievement of white, European males. So what we should be doing is being critical, being willing to expose those white, European males as having a seamy underbelly, to play up their historical sins. At the same time, we should look empathetically to the groups that they have been beating upon historically, and we should play up the achievements of those groups or at least to try to engender in our students sympathy for the groups that have been beat up in history.

For example, if we talk about the European settlement of North America, the typical modernist story will be that the Europeans brought the Enlightenment, democracy, science, universal human rights, and so forth to benefit not only themselves but also the Native Americans. They took an essentially empty society and built civilization up from nothing. What we should be arguing instead, from the postmodernist perspective, is that the Europeans brought with them imperialism, racism, disease, intolerant religion, and a willingness to use the power of government to commit genocides on the native populations. Additionally, when we tell the stories of the natives, we should play up the fact that the natives were peaceful, that they were living in harmony with nature rather than exploiting it.

So, we need to remake the discipline of history in a much more group, egalitarian fashion and strip away the pretenses of the progressive, optimistic story that has dominated the teaching of history for the past two centuries.

## Section 22 — Postmodern Education: Science

Third, science. The teaching of science has also come under criticism from the postmodern perspective.

The *modern* perspective on the scientific way of thinking is that science is based on observation. Observation should be universal to the species, as should reasoning and the capacity for doing scientific analysis. So, to the modernist science is universalistic. The truths the sciences come up with should be believed by all people, so we should have *one* scientific set of truths, *one* scientific curriculum, and one scientific set of content and method that all students should learn and all students should become proficient at.

What the postmodernists argue is that science is only way of thinking about the world. Scientific reasoning and analysis is one way, of course, of telling the story about the world. But it seems to be one that is more amenable to a white, male, or European way of thinking. Yet we should not be exclusionary or dismissive of the idea that there might be a more female way of thinking, or a more non-white way of thinking, or non-European traditions of thinking about the world that are empathetic, more emotionalist, more socially constructive, more magical, and so forth. We should not privilege science and we should be sensitive and open to other kinds of stories.

This kind of battle comes to the fore over standardized test scores, for example. Various standardized tests will be given and we might notice that males typically score better on science, math, logic, and quantitative sections than females do. Or we might notice that white and Asian students do better on science and math than Hispanic and black students do.

How do we interpret these results? We can say, "Well, this just shows that we need to work more with girls to improve their math proficiency or that we need to be working more with Hispanic students to increase their science proficiencies."

But the assumption there is that *all* groups, no matter their background, should learn *one* way of thinking and that we should be totalizing and universalizing and forcing them to fit the model.

From the postmodern way of thinking, we get an argument that we should not expect all groups, given their histories and their different identities, to perform equally well on science, math, and quantitative kinds of disciplines. It is both unjust and oppressive to do so.

Such tests may also privilege a white way of thinking, a male way of thinking, or a European way of thinking. So they are biased. But by demanding that all non-white-males think that way, we are setting them up for failure because they are not going to be able to meet those standards. Consequently, we are setting them up for a secondary or a marginalized position in society. If that Euro-scientific way of thinking is not from them—if it imposes upon them an alien way of thinking—then they will never be proficient at it. Then by the time they get through the school system, their grades will be subpar. That means we are setting

them up only for subpar positions in society, which means we're excluding from access to the avenues of power and wealth.

Science is one limited way of thinking and it is a biased way of thinking. What we should do, then, is marginalizing science, making room in the curriculum for other ways of thinking. That will mean institutionalizing those other ways of thinking to get all groups equal power.

This then is *not* to say that some other group's way of thinking is the right way. The postmodern project is to say that there is no such thing as a right answer, there is no such thing as the true way, and there is no such thing as a happily-ever-after story that we can tell about society as a whole. No meta-narratives.

Society is a multidimensional group conflict—an ongoing power struggle between the strong and the weak along a variety of dimensions. We postmodern educators need to recognize the power struggle for what it is and empower ourselves to be able to enter into that ongoing rhetorical battle. We should identify with the groups that have historically been oppressed and attempt to bring them to a position of greater equality, or at least to a position of being able to realize their own cultural aspirations in society. That requires that we lessen the death grip of power that certain dominant groups have had on existing society.

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*[This is a lightly-edited transcription of Stephen Hicks's [video lecture on Postmodernism](#). The video lecture is Part 14 of his *Philosophy of Education* video course. The full fifteen-lecture course is available free online at [Professor Hicks's website](#) and at [YouTube](#).]*