

Postmodernism's moral low ground

We must all join the battle against nihilism and oppression

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Are we fighting postmodernists with one hand tied behind our backs? Intellectual battles are the cognitive lifeblood of a healthy society. Life is complicated and the stakes are high, so thoughtful and passionate people have lots of arguments. Only by argument can we sort out complicated matters. Only by putting our ideas to the evidence test and being willing to change our minds can we make progress.

Intellectual fighting is better than settling our differences by physical fighting. The advantage of being an intelligent species, noted Austrian philosopher Karl Popper, is that we let our theories die in our place. But productive argument needs principles of civility to guide it. And we need our leading institutions – especially universities dedicated to truth-seeking – to make those principles explicit and instil them in the next generation.

Postmodernists don't fight by the same rules we do. When everything is subjective narratives, subversion goes all the way down. Our classic rules are: Approach discussion with benevolence and give the initial benefit of the doubt. The goal is the mutual advancement of understanding. Hear out both sides. Be civil in giving and receiving criticism. Don't make stuff up. Believe that truth matters.

But postmoderns cast a jaded eye upon 'truth' and see words as weapons in a battle between adversarial groups. In that battle, only power matters and 'truth' is merely the most ruthless survivor. American postmodernist Richard Rorty put it this way: 'Truth is what your contemporaries let you get away with saying.' Rorty's fellow-travelers, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and others work the same deconstructive territory.

Our code of ethics also includes moral rules: Be respectful of legitimate differences. Tolerate an expansive range of beliefs and practices, unless physical force is initiated. Don't name-call or hurl insults easily. Be respectful of others' accomplishments and proud of one's own. Admit mistakes; strive to correct them.

On that latter point about responsibility: cultural improvement is a trial-and-error process, and while we have made great progress against poverty, slavery, racism, sexism, and incivilities, our historical record is imperfect. Hence the appropriateness of our intense debates, for example, over affirmative action. Can we make up for past sins? If so, how can we apportion blame and desert fairly? Hard questions, but morally responsible people take their history seriously.

Here again Rorty represents the postmoderns. Asked directly about the Left's many historical sins and outright brutalities – and it's striking that most postmoderns are Left, usually the far Left – Rorty replied: 'I think that a good Left is a party that always thinks about the future and doesn't care much about our past sins.' (How unsurprising that young Leftists are blasé about the Soviet Union, China, Cambodia, Cuba, Venezuela, etc.)

I'm using Rorty as a foil, but it's important that he's a mild postmodernist who – despite his philosophy of getting away with stuff and calculated forgetfulness – hopes we can still try to be nice to each other. His followers are not so nice. The nastiest insults fly easily. Fascist. Racist. Toxic sexist pig. So how do we deal with vigorous activists who are cynical about truth and civil debate?

In my upcoming *Adventures in Postmodernism* tour (four cities) we will grapple with that question. The first step is understanding what we're up against. Bad philosophy got us into this mess, so philosophical self-education is essential. And that means grasping the fundamentality and audacity of the postmodern challenge. Postmodernists are clear that they are purely negative and adversarial. Foucault: 'These investigations are not intended to ameliorate, alleviate, or make an oppressive system more bearable. They are intended to attack it in places where it is called something else – justice, technique, knowledge, objectivity. Each investigation must... be a political act.'

Postmoderns reject everything impor-

tant about our civilisation, root and branch, as oppressive.

Note the key word of Martin Heidegger – in whose writings the postmodernists are steeped – who argued that our entire Western tradition must be subject to 'Destruction'. And note that Friedrich Nietzsche, another hero to postmodernists, argued that Western civilisation had exhausted itself and was into an age of nihilism. Oppression, attack, *Destruction*, nihilism. And since 'Western' civilisation is increasingly a misnomer as classical and Enlightenment values spread around the world, the stakes are truly global.

Yet the postmoderns know that we advocates of civilisation are serious about truth and justice and that we take pride in our great-but-imperfect progress. It's precisely our seriousness and pride that they aim to subvert – and to replace them with cynicism, self-doubt and guilt. Hence the relentless charges of racial/gender/financial sin and of hidden, unsavoury motives.

We also need action steps against postmodernism, as intellectuals and activists ourselves, as parents and educators, as business professionals and politicians. What do we do to defend and advance genuine civilisation? It's helpful here to recognise that a nihilistic philosophy is uncreative. It offers no truth, no goodness, no beauty, no creation of value. It has to be parasitic on those philosophies that generate positivity in the world.

That is to say that postmodernism depends on the very system it attacks for both material resources and moral status. So the action step is to remove the resources. Derrida stated forthrightly that postmodernism was giving birth to 'the formless, mute, infant and terrifying form of monstrosity.' We must starve the beast.

The high road does involve costs. But we have advanced civilisation against amoral and immoral adversaries by taking the high road – in the hard work that created material prosperity, in the honest thinking that eliminated crippling diseases and doubled lifespans, in the righteousness of our vigorously attacking slavery, and the deep commitment to justice that extended liberties and equalities to men and women of all races and ethnicities – and on the basis of a philosophy that strives for objectivity and often achieves it. We are the force for truth and goodness in the world. That is, we have the moral high ground. Know your enemy, yes, but first know yourself.

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