

**POSTMODERNISM –HAVE WE SEEN THE END OF IT?**

**By**

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When Ronald Reagan used the word “evil” to describe the Soviet Union in a speech delivered to the House of Commons on June 8, 1982, one could almost hear the collective groans of intellectual embarrassment from western academia at the use of the word. Twenty years later, however, another conservative American President, George W. Bush, would use the word “evil” frequently to describe terrorists and nation states. Often using a “good versus evil” duality that fourth century Manicheans would have found exhilarating, Bush did not evoke quite the same collective gasps from academics that his predecessor, Ronald Reagan, had done twenty years earlier. Other prominent thinkers, public figures and writers more liberal than President Bush have also recently used the term “evil.” As recently as March, 2004 Hans Blix, weapons inspector for the U.N., in an interview with Deborah Solomon in the New York Times described Saddam Hussein as “...Satan himself! Evil personified.” And Thomas Friedman in a New York Times editorial (March 28, 2004) described the 9/11 hijackers as “...people with evil...imagination.” What was the reason that so many found the use of absolute moral terms such as “good/evil”, “right/wrong” and “moral/immoral” to be more acceptable today than twenty years ago? Certainly the bombing of the twin towers in New York on September 11, 2001 was such a heinous act that any sane person would be outraged. That could explain some of the silence of intellectuals. However, I think that there is another reason to explain this change in thinking.

I would like to argue, gentlemen, that the answer lies, in part, in the decline of an intellectual movement that began in the late 1960’s and dominated western thought through the 1990’s. Although intellectually refreshing in its nascent phase, it became, over time, too extreme and more and more obfuscating, resulting in its decline. However, this intellectual movement had a profound effect on all aspects of western thinking and institutions including our worlds of architecture, art, music, and literature. The intellectual movement is called postmodernism.

First, we must ask, “What is postmodernism?” If I were to pose that question to each of you at this table many of you might have difficulty coming up with a definition. Indeed, gentlemen, you would not be alone. Many academics have had trouble defining the movement.

“What is postmodernism?” It is generally agreed by most scholars that it is a late 20<sup>th</sup> century reaction to modernism. For that reason, we must begin by describing modernism.

Modernism is an intellectual movement that had its early origins in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment in Europe. As Europe emerged from the Middle Ages, a new confidence in the ability of man’s ability to understand and explain the world developed. Galileo, Copernicus and the great Isaac Newton would, by observation and reason, unlock many of nature’s great secrets. Natural phenomenon, considered strictly under the domain of God, could now be explained using human observation and experimentation. Additionally, these observations could be quantified and set into physical and mathematical laws. No longer did man have to rely on divine revelation for truth because natural science could cut those Gordian knotted secrets and human reason was the blade to do it.

This new enlightenment view also had its impact in the field of government. The divine right of kings was questioned by European and New World intellectuals. By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, France’s ancient regime was overthrown and the world’s greatest democratic experiment, the United States of America, was established.

Western Europe and America began to put their scientific knowledge to practical benefit resulting in new inventions. This industrial revolution quickly made powerhouses, both economically and militarily, of the western European countries and the United States. In order to obtain raw materials, colonies were critical. This resulted in these powerful countries coming into contact with less powerful but resource rich countries and regions populated by peoples less advanced scientifically. Predictably, the conquered peoples and their cultures were viewed as “inferior” to their conquerors and to Western cultures. By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Western European nations and the United States of America were on top of the world power stage. Their ascendance to world power had been on the foundations of reason and science, the backbone of the Enlightenment.

The unquestioned success of science and technology in the USA and Europe resulted in a worldview that was incredibly optimistic. The reasoning went as such: man is rational because he is part of a rational universe that was created by a rational God. Since God endowed man with the power of reason, it is man’s duty to not only endeavor to understand the world, but also to change it for the better in all its aspects, namely materially, socially, governmentally, economically, and spiritually. This is the goal of modernism. A contemporary German expert on this subject, Dr. Habermas in his 1981 article entitled, “Modernity – An Incomplete Project,” states that modernism “...held to the extravagant expectation that the arts and sciences would

further not only the control of forces of nature but also the understanding of self and world, moral progress, justice in social institutions, and even human happiness.” (Ref #5)

In short, the modernist project was to improve the world, mankind and his society under the direction of reason and western morality. The search for the truth, be it scientific or moral, was an important endeavor because “the truth” really existed and, if one worked hard, the “truth” could be revealed. This confidence in absolute values and standards in all spheres left no room for relative truths, situational ethics, multicultural standards, or pluralism. At the end of the day, we, meaning European and American men, knew what was right and wrong, what had value and what had no value, and who should be at the table making the ethical, moral, economic, governmental, artistic and scientific decisions.

This reeling self-confidence in modernism and the hegemony of American and Western European values and culture reached its apogee as the world entered the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since all was well in the kingdom, so to speak, we must ask what caused intellectuals to question the tenants of modernism and why would this questioning ultimately usher in a movement called postmodernism? Or to state it another way, “What caused the disillusionment with modernism?”

In short, the voices of disillusionment came from the continent that had conceived and nurtured the movement of modernism. In the lands where human progress through reason ruled triumphantly, there occurred two world wars, the second even more horrific than the first. These events shook the foundations of modernism. And World War II witnessed a violation of human rights greater than the western world had ever known. Sandwiched between these wars was an economic collapse that catapulted the western world into a major social crisis. It became obvious to many intellectuals on the continent that the powers of reason had not been successful to prevent these global disasters.

A growing depression and nihilism, born from these terrible world events of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, fueled the questioning of the tenants of modernism. Many of these intellectuals were from France where there has always been an historical celebration of philosophy and social criticism. One can only speculate why France became the cradle of this critique of modernism. Perhaps the two world wars fought on her soil followed by the Algerian and French Indo-China experience led French intellectuals to rethink their basic values systems. Their names have perforated the media over the past thirty years—Michael Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Spivek, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, Felix Guattari, Roland Barthes, and Gilles Deleuze. Time does not allow me to detail their

thoughts individually but I do wish to draw upon them collectively to describe the movement ascribed to them, a movement which would later become known as postmodernism. I do realize, gentlemen, that by trying to capsule their general point of view, one does not do complete justice to them all.

Let me, gentlemen, try to summarize the thinking of these questioners of modernism. These philosophers argued that there are no absolute truths and, for that reason, there can be no hierarchy of values. Likewise, there can be no hierarchy of cultures. To postmodernists, all cultures have equal value and no culture is privileged over another. Additionally, there is no developmental progression of history or culture. Postmodern philosophers would argue that any “truth” espoused by a culture or a dominant power group in a society is done to justify its power over the ones less powerful. Hence all cultural texts must be examined and “deconstructed” to reveal hierarchies and presuppositions whether they are in the moral, historic, religious and even scientific realm. These texts or statements are referred to by Francois Lyotard as “meta-narratives” and are used to justify the society and its values. Every culture has its grand narrative. Western European culture’s grand narrative is based on the belief that man is rational and through reason and science absolute truths can be elucidated. Additionally, democracy is the most rational and enlightened form of government and will result in human happiness. Lyotard argued that these grand narratives are constructed by the leaders of the society or culture and, in so doing, marginalize other people, beliefs and institutions outside of the mainstream of the culture. When Lyotard’s book, The Postmodern Condition, was published in the early 1980’s the term postmodernism stuck to these thinkers and their ideas. However, for historical accuracy, the first use of the term “postmodernism” can be found in 1947 to describe a new architecture that was a reaction to the modernist block-like buildings of the day.

As I mentioned earlier, the term “postmodernism,” gentlemen, is difficult to define. John McGowan from the 1997 “Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism” states that “...postmodernism is best understood as marking the site of several related, but not identical, debates among intellectuals in the last four decades of the twentieth century.” (Ref #7) These debates questioned the foundations of modernism as it had developed in the western world over the past 200 years. David Brooks, in his book On Paradise Drive, summarizes the postmodern world as follows:

*Truth is indeterminate...Texts are deconstructed in an infinitude of ways, and words are signifiers open to a diversity of meanings. Every point of view deserves respect. The enlightened person should be open to everything—opinions, lifestyles, and*

*ideologies—and closed to nothing. One should never judge The Other harshly, but should respect minority or multicultural alternatives. (Ref #2 / p. 161)*

To reiterate, gentlemen, no culture is better than another. There is no absolute right or wrong, good or evil. To criticize or judge is anathema to postmodernism. The impact of this intellectual movement has been felt in the artistic, cultural, intellectual, social, and governmental areas of Europe and the United States. Since illustrations are sometimes better than definitions, let me give you a few examples of how postmodernism impacted our world.

Interestingly, postmodernism had one of its most welcoming beds in the prestigious universities and colleges of the United States. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, the prestigious college and university classrooms were filled with mostly white upper income male students. The majority of the faculty was white with very few female professors. The western intellectual tradition was not only celebrated in courses usually with names such as “Western Civilization” or “Cultural Heritage” but these courses were required for graduation. The readings in these courses consisted of selections from western intellectuals and authors from ancient Greece to Europe and the United States. Naturally, selections from the Bible were also included. These writings were referred to as the western canon and were taught with a modernist approach. Many of us in this room were required to take such courses.

As the intellectual waves of postmodernism lapped onto the shores of American colleges and universities, they offered young professors and their students a wonderful new and refreshing approach to the required canonical texts. These texts were intellectually “deconstructed” to offer new interpretations. The young faculty members who were required to teach these texts could establish their own identity and prestige by questioning the standard interpretations of the basic canon. Older professors were challenged by these young faculty members. A more and more diverse student body supported these challenges. The result is that the bibliography of the courses of western civilization was either expanded, resulting in inclusion of women and minority authors, or abandoned altogether on the basis of pluralism and political correctness. This pluralism, one of the mainstays of postmodernism, was reflected by a change in the university and college demographics of both the faculty and students. Most of the Ivy League and Seven Sisters colleges became co-educational. There was also great pressure to admit minority students and faculty. As the modernist project became more and more battered for its lack of political incorrectness, new departments in social sciences with such names as “Women’s Studies,” “African American Studies,” and “Gay and Lesbian Studies” were established. Western civilization courses were dropped from many prestigious colleges and universities.

Outside the academies major changes were occurring. Let me remind you, gentlemen, that the modernist world-view is male, white, heterosexual, Euro-centric and Judeo-Christian. Although giving lip service to equality and civil rights for all, the United States, on the pragmatic level, was found lacking. Again, postmodernism found another welcoming bed in the power politics and philosophies of African-Americans, Native-Americans, Mexican-Americans, women, gays and lesbians as they would either individually or collectively push for full and equal participation in all levels of society. By the end of the 1980's the classrooms of the elite schools, board rooms of major businesses, staff rooms of major hospitals, legal chambers of the courts and law firms, and the rotundas of government reflected a pluralism inconceivable in the 1950's. The heretofore power elite, namely white heterosexual males, was made to make room and seriously listen to voices that they never would have listened to before for the simple reason that these voices were never in the power rooms. And there were many who felt that these changes not only were long overdue but also enhanced and enriched the society as a whole.

The art world also welcomed the postmodernist's agenda. Postmodernists would argue that there is no such thing as "high" and "low" art. To make the point, I shall offer you two dramatic examples.

In the field of music, we find a musical composition by the postmodernist composer John Cage (1912-1992), known as the "Silent Piece." This musical composition comprises four minutes and thirty three seconds of a pianist sitting at the piano in an auditorium and not playing a single note. This is certainly standing the western modernist notion of "high" art on its musical ear, if you will. After all, adherents of modernism would argue that music should at least have notes and be melodic and, in order to be great, should be uplifting. But the postmodernist would argue that Cage has taken the concept of music to its most profound elements, namely, sound...or a lack thereof...in a specified time interval. In Cage's "Silent Piece" the audience listens to the ambient concert hall sounds for 4 minutes and 33 seconds while the pianists sits at the piano quietly.

In the field of visual art, there are many examples of postmodernism. Marcel Duchamp's (1887-1968) famous "Fountain" displayed in New York's "Independent Show" foreshadowed the postmodern art world. As many of you know, it is a found object, a urinal, that Duchamp turned upside down...and its effect was the same by turning the established modernist art world upside down. This was not "high" art in the traditional modernist view. But Duchamp, like John Cage, was questioning the basic tenants of art in a profound way. Duchamp had taken an object that anyone at this table could buy and called it not only a "work of art" but "his" work of art. And,

paradoxically, he signed a fictitious name on it: R. Mutt. And, to cap it all off, there are three versions of this piece called "Fountain." Which one is the original and which one is the copy? Are any of them art when you or I could go to a plumbing store and buy one? Modernism would argue that a work of art is just that...namely a piece made by the artist with his own hands. And to the modernist, art is supposed to be inspirational and not supposed to put our minds, as does Duchamp's work, in the urinal. For the postmodernist, art is anything that an artist calls art. A walk through any contemporary gallery or museum today finds the definition of art, as the modernist would understand it, quite strained and postmodern.

As one can see, postmodernism, with its emphasis on diversity, multiculturalism, and pluralism, shook up the western world in a very profound way. The effects were felt and seen everywhere in our society and, arguably, resulted in many positive cultural changes. But, as I would like to argue tonight gentlemen, postmodernism was taken to an extreme and, for that reason, declined. Postmodernism's demise, I believe, began in the late 1980's and 1990's. Here are some examples, gentlemen.

In the academic world, the new departments, created with the idea of broadening and empowering minority voices and points of view, began to take extreme positions. At Wellesley College an African Studies Department course entitled "Africans in Antiquity," taught that Socrates and Cleopatra were Africans and that Greek philosophy was stolen from Africa. Outraged by these claims, Dr. Mary Lefkowitz, a classics professor at Wellesley, in her book entitled Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History, refuted these and other such claims by the professors in the African Studies Departments by using rigorous scholarly methods. In an attempt to explain why this revisionist history is taking place, she writes:

*There is a current tendency at least among academics, to regard history as a form of fiction that can be and should be written differently by each nation or ethnic group. The assumption seems to be that somehow all versions will simultaneously be true, even if they conflict in particular details. According to this line of argument, Afrocentric ancient history can be treated not as pseudohistory but as an alternative way of looking at the past. It can be considered as valid as the traditional version, and perhaps even more valid because of its moral agenda. It confers a new and higher status on an ethnic group whose history has largely remained obscure. (Ref #7 / P. xii)*

Closer to home, Stanford University underwent an intellectual postmodern soul searching in regards to its Western Civilization course in the 1980's. Criticized as irrelevant and racist, it was changed to a course called "Cultures, Ideas, and Values"



(CIV). The renaming sums up postmodernism as described by Dinesh D'Souza in his book, Illiberal Education, The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus:

*...Thus the term "Western" was eliminated to remove any taint of preference for European and American thought. The term "cultures" signaled a new pluralism—not one culture but many. "Values" suggested a certain relativism, in which various systems of thought would be considered on a roughly equal plane. Certainly any hierarchy of cultural values would be alien to the spirit if not the letter of the new requirement.*

*(Ref # 4 / p. 67)*

D'Souza also states that after the change in the Western Civilization Curriculum, Deans Wasow and Junkerman wrote to the parents of the undergraduates saying, "the great books requirement had become a 'pedagogic handicap' because it was conveying the message that works by women and minorities are inferior to those by men of European descent." (Ref # 4 / p. 67)

As Shakespeare and Mozart had to make room to authors such as Naipaul and composers of Reggae in the Stanford's CIV course, apologist of no minor stature felt compelled to step forward to argue that the proponents of postmodernism had gone too far. Lamenting this change in the curriculum, Harold Bloom, professor of Humanities at Yale and author of The Western Canon stated that the erosion of the western canon by "...professors of hip-hop; by clones of Gallic-Germanic theory; by ideologues of gender and of various sexual persuasions; by multiculturalists unlimited...is irreversible." (Ref #1 / p.519) Bernard Knox, director emeritus of Harvard's Center for Hellenic Studies, however, writes optimistically in his book, The Oldest Dead White European Males:

*As for multicultural curriculum that is the ideal of today's academic radicals, there can be no valid objection to the inclusion of new material that gives the student a wider view. But that material will have to compete with the old, and if it is not up to the same high level, it will sooner or later be rejected with disdain by the students themselves; only a totalitarian regime can enforce the continued study of second-rate texts or outworn philosophies. As long as the thoroughly Greek idea of competition is allowed free play, there is no need to worry about the future place of Greek in the curriculum. (Ref #6 p 21)*

Even those who read the writings of members of the postmodern pantheon began to become a bit disenchanted as the writings became more obfuscating and opaque. I shall quote passages from two postmodern French writers to give you, gentlemen, a

taste of their prose. I want to emphasize that these are direct quotes and not parodies. Let us listen to Felix Guattari:

*We can clearly see that there is no bi-univocal correspondence between linear signifying links or archi-writing, depending on the author and this multireferential, multi-dimensional machinic catalysis. The symmetry of scale, the transversality, the pathis non-discursive character of their expansion: all these dimensions remove us from the logic of the excluded middles and reinforces us in our dismissal of the ontological binarism we criticized preciously. (Ref #3)*

Got it? Let me test your patience a bit more, gentlemen, and quote another postmodernist writer, Gilles Deleuze:

*In the first place, singularities-events correspond to heterogeneous series which are organized into a system which is neither stable or unstable, but rather “metastable” endowed with a potential energy wherein the differences between series are distributed...  
(Ref # 3)*

If you have any idea what either of these writers just said speak up now gentlemen to clarify it for us all.

When postmodernists started to comment on hard science, their points of view, even to the non-physicist, became patently outrageous. An example is Luce Irigaray, a female French postmodernist, who espoused that  $E=MC^2$  was a sexed equation because it privileged the speed of light over other kinds of speed (Ref #9 / p. 109). She also contended that solid mechanics is privileged over fluid mechanics because “men have sex organs that protrude and become rigid” whereas women have openings that leak menstrual blood and vaginal fluids.” (Ref 9 / p110) To her the laws of physics are arbitrary social constructions by men to perpetuate male dominance in the world.

Just as the Wellesley classics professor Lefkowitz responded to the nonsense regarding distortions in the classics from professors with a postmodernist point of view, a NYU physics professor named Alan Sokal decided to respond to the postmodern critics of physics. In 1996 he placed a very embarrassing and public nail in the proverbial postmodern coffin. It received national coverage and has become known as “Sokal’s Hoax.” What Sokal did was this: he submitted a paper entitled “Transgressing the boundaries: towards a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity” to the United States premier postmodern journal called “Social Text.” The paper was, as described by Sokal, “a parody article crammed with nonsensical, but

unfortunately authentic, quotations about physics and mathematics by prominent French and American intellectuals.” (Ref #9) The postmodern journal immediately published the article despite the fact that an undergraduate physics major could have ripped it to scientific shreds. Obviously, the editors of the journal “Social Text” were flattered that a prominent physics professor was finally seeing science their way, namely a social construction not bounded by nature’s laws. Sokal immediately revealed the “hoax” after his bogus article was published. The “hoax” landed in the New York Times. Perhaps it was Sokal’s hoax, as well as mounting critiques of postmodernism, that led Patricia Leigh Brown to write in the New York Times (3/21/04) that “...the prevailing sentiment among scholars has been to pronounce postmodern theory...dead.”

As many of you gentlemen know, on October 8, 2004, Jacques Derrida died. He was one of the last members of the group of French intellectuals who were classified as “postmodernists.” In an editorial in the New York Times (October 17, 2004) entitled “The Death of Everything, R.I.P.,” Emily Eakins, like Patricia Leigh Brown, wrote: “With the death on Oct. 8 of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, the era of big theory came to a quiet close.”

Many outside the academia were tiring of the power politics of race, gender and sexual orientation. Political correctness was stifling genuine dialogue on important subjects. Even though multiculturalism, relative ethics, and pluralism ruled the day, it was hard to justify the postmodernist’s point of view when it came to some disturbing cultural practices in the non-western world. Who could really justify a culture that denied women’s literacy as espoused by the Taliban in Afghanistan. Who could justify a culture that practiced genital mutilation of women in Africa? Who could really justify graffiti as great art? Yes, the pendulum was swinging back to the tenants of modernism. Perhaps, there is a good and an evil, a right and a wrong, a just and an unjust, a truth and a non-truth. Perhaps the world is not, as many postmodernist would have one believe, totally relativistic.

At the beginning of this paper I cited two different responses when the word “evil” was used by President Reagan and President Bush. Those responses were reflected the rise and fall of the movement of postmodernism.

And where are we now, gentlemen? I believe the pendulum has swung back from an extreme postmodernist view towards modernism. But that excursion of the pendulum that postmodernist ideology took society has impacted, I believe, the western world positively. The tenants of the movement shook up the prevailing worldview. It opened our minds in new ways of human expression be it in the academy, museums, concert halls, society and government. In so doing, it moved our societies in the

direction of inclusiveness, justice, and tolerance. And for that reason, postmodernism, although fading as an intellectual philosophy, enriched the western world.

#### ENDNOTES

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