



Armchair postmodernism

Description

What is (or was) postmodernism? â??[T]ruth is relative, morality is subjective, and therefore all of our individually preferred â??narrativesâ?? that give our lives meaning are equally true and worthy of validation,â?• wrote David Ernst by way of definition in [The Federalist](#) (21 January 2017).

It seems that the current US president is the first â??to turn postmodernism against itself,â?• demonstrating what it means when people in power circulate alternative truths and counter-truths, as if all facts are up for grabs. Whoever shouts loudest and longest and with the greatest following, wins. But in any case, with all this confusion who can be sure of anything?

Anti-hero

Ernst argues that this postmodern climate sets the stage for the charismatic anti-hero, who is as bad as the rest, and perhaps worse, but who is honest about what he feels, and speaks his mind. Bereft of any shame he can identify or imply the hypocrisy in his critics.

It is as if he says: â??So Iâ??m a greedy businessman who stiffes my contractors? Fine. Youâ??re a corrupt politician who sells out our national interest to line your own pockets. Maybe everything they say about me is true, but at least Iâ??m authentic, at least Iâ??m real: you on the other hand, are a bloody, disgusting hypocrite.â?•



Ernst's piece is a critique against much of liberal, university educated America (and the rest of the world), whose intellectual base, at least in the social sciences, arts and humanities was responsible for identifying and circulating the concept of postmodernity. In this light, liberals have brought the White House demagog upon themselves.

Indeed, liberal intellectuals have done a bad job if they failed to communicate what postmodernism is, or at least the various discourses that surround the term.

As for any intellectual insight of importance it's not easy to provide a pithy one-liner (as it is for a populist). Jean-François Lyotard wrote in *The Postmodern Condition* (1986), "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives." From his subsequent argument and that of countless others, whatever he meant, he did not mean all beliefs and assertions are equally true. He had relativism in his sights as much as fundamentalism. See post: [What's wrong with postmodernism](#).

Anti-intellectual backlash

US philosopher Richard Rorty apparently predicted the rise of a charismatic populism back in the late 1990s. So far I've read the first chapter of his short book *Achieving Our Country* ([online](#)), but the following extract from a different chapter has been doing the rounds on social media.

"[M]embers of labor unions, and unorganized unskilled workers, will sooner or later realize that their government is not even trying to prevent wages from sinking or to prevent jobs from being exported. Around the same time, they will realize that suburban white-collar workers themselves desperately afraid of being downsized are not going to let themselves be taxed to provide social benefits for anyone else.

At that point, something will crack. The nonsuburban electorate will decide that the system has failed and start looking around for a strongman to vote for someone willing to assure them that, once he is elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen, and postmodernist professors will no longer be calling the shots."

One thing that is very likely to happen is that the gains made in the past 40 years by black and brown Americans, and by homosexuals, will be wiped out. Jocular contempt for women will come back into fashion. All the resentment which badly educated Americans feel about having their manners dictated to them by college graduates will find an outlet.

Buildings

The [Huffington post reported](#) today that 20 Fenchurch Street (the Walkie Talkie Building) has been bought by Donald Trump, and has already been branded as such. Happy April Fool's Day!



References

- Lyotard, Jean-François. 1986. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press [Online](#).
- Rorty, Richard. 1999. *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-century America: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Notes

- Also see Slavoj Zizek: [We Must Rise from the Ashes of Liberal Democracy](#). (3 March 2017)
- The first picture is of a bus poster for Dreamworks's CGI animation *The Boss Baby* released yesterday. The baby is voiced by Alec Baldwin who features as Trump impersonator on Saturday Night Live. See movie review in [Vanity Fair](#).

Category

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