



Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault (Expanded Edition)

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Tracing postmodernism from its roots in Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant to their development in thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Richard Rorty, philosopher Stephen Hicks provides a provocative account of why postmodernism has been the most vigorous intellectual movement of the late 20th century. Why do skeptical and relativistic arguments have such power in the contemporary intellectual world? Why do they have that power in the humanities but not in the sciences? Why has a significant portion of the political Left - the same Left that traditionally promoted reason, science, equality for all, and optimism - now switched to themes of anti-reason, anti-science, double standards, and cynicism? Explaining Postmodernism is intellectual history with a polemical twist, providing fresh insights into the debates underlying the furor over political correctness, multiculturalism, and the future of liberal democracy. This Expanded Edition includes two additional essays by Stephen Hicks: *Free Speech and Postmodernism* and *From Modern to Postmodern Art: Why Art Became Ugly*.

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From Reader Review Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault (Expanded Edition) for online ebook

Safat says

I took up this book because I see the word 'postmodernism' thrown around a lot, without any clear understanding of what it is. This book not only explains and diagnoses postmodernism, but also attempts to trace its ancestry.

What is then, postmodernism?

Well, it's more like anti-modernism?

What is modernism, then?

Modernism is the core set of values adapted in the Enlightenment. In medieval times, people predominantly believed in the supernaturalism, that man is wretched, and driven by faith, rather than reason. Along came the modernist, who said that there's an 'objective reality' out there, that can be known by reason, and promoted individualism over the medieval collectivism. Of course, that left very little room for God or other supernatural ideas, at least the intellectuals were becoming increasingly naturalistic in their worldview which got disposed of God, or marginalized God. Consider Spinoza's God, later adopted by Einstein, which doesn't really interfere in man's daily affairs. What's the point of such inactive God, a religious person might ask. Understandably, this made certain pro-God intellectuals seething with rage. So they marshalled an attack on the values of the modernism.

Presumably, it all began with the great Kant.

Kant argued, if we perceive the 'outside world' through our senses, so can't possibly know the 'objective world' out there, we can only perceive the filtered data that our senses allow us to perceive. So, any idea of knowing the 'objective reality' therefore must be dismissed.

Now, Kant supposedly was an advocate of reason. But also, he put reason in its 'right place'. It's more like saying, 'I'm a great advocate of women rights, but it must be understood that women have no valid rights outside their own kitchen' (borrowing an analogy here provided by the author of the book, because I found myself incapable of making a better one). Kant said, okay, you want to use reason, fine. But remember that the realm of reason is severely restricted (to the senses), and don't try to claim anything 'absolute' using your silly little reasons.

Now, why did Kant have to undermine reason? He himself said that he had to undermine reason to 'make room for faith'. Reason can do whatever it wants within the phenomenal world guaranteed by the senses, but who knew what lies outside the senses?

Later, Hegel took it one step further. Whereas Kant posited that there is after all an 'objective reality', which is and will be forever close to us because of the finitude of our senses, for Hegel, there was no objective reality at all. This whole phenomenal world is the creation of the subject himself. While Kant undermined the scope of reason epistemologically (and quite rationally, in my opinion), Hegel took a metaphysical leap, and did it irrationally.

The anti-reason stronghold was strong in Germany. Another famous German philosopher, Schopenhauer, who was contemporary of Hegel and hated him to the guts, also condemned reason as limited (and unlike Hegel, was an atheist). Later another atheistic anti-reason big fish in philosophy, Nietzsche, remarked,

"They are no philosophical

race, these Englishmen: Bacon signifies an attack on the philosophical spirit;

Hobbes, Hume, and Locke a debasement and lowering of the value of the concept

of 'philosophy' for more than a century. It was against Hume that Kant arose, and rose; it was Locke of whom Schelling said, understandably, je méprise Locke [I despise

Locke]; in their fight against the English-mechanistic doltification of the world, Hegel and Schopenhauer were of one mind (with Goethe)--these two hostile brother geniuses in philosophy who strove apart toward opposite poles of the German spirit and in the process wronged each other as only brothers wrong each other."

See also

Then there was Denmark's Kierkegaard, according to whom Christ can only be known by a 'leap of faith', not by tiny constricting categories of reason.

In the twentieth century, we see continental anti-reason philosopher like Heidegger, and analytical philosophers like Wittgenstein, both of whom restricted the realm of reason in their own ways. Then came the philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn, who in his landmark book 'The structure of scientific revolution' propounded that the idea that our idea objectivity is 'theory laden', we see the world to fit in within our theories, and there is ultimately no objectivity after all (of course, the idea is much more nuanced and goes beyond the scope of this petty review).

So, postmodernism.

Where do this all fit together?

Contemporary postmodernists cite Foucault, Derrida, Rorty. These figures in turn cite Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Marx, and who in turn cite figures like Schopenhauer, Hegel, and the main culprit Kant. So you can see how it all goes down.

In the first part, the author discusses the epistemological roots of postmodernism, which is to say that everything is more or less subjective, and objective knowledge is not possible in any real sense. Oh, yes, and everything is dependent on 'subjective interpretation'.

But we also know that the father figures of twentieth century postmodernism are all far left. Why is that? Here in the second part of the book, the author traces back the political root of postmodernism. As a hardcore Matrix fan, epistemology always appeals more to me than politics. But as pages went by, I got hooked with the political dimension too.

I wouldn't go much into the political dimension. The thesis of the author is this: as the left took a beating at the hand of capitalism in the twentieth century, they adapted the rhetoric of postmodernism. 'Truth' is a dangerous concept invented by the powerful to exploit the minor races, and sanctifying the exploration. Reason is a white western social construction. Nothing, including art, is really of any ,everything is subjective and dependent on interpretations. Consider the famous Duchamp phenomenon, who, when asked for submission of an art by the Society of independent artists in New York, submitted an urinal. Not that he made it himself, but he bought it from a mass producing factory, and signed his name on it. The implication was clear. Art is not anything 'sublime'. If I see art in an urinal, it is art indeed, it is all subjective and relative .Art can be something I piss on.

The tone of the author was anti-postmodernist, he clearly doesn't like the group. He psychoanalyzed the 'pathologies' of postmodernism, and to some extent sympathized with the poor deprived leftist postmodernists.

But then at last, he concluded that postmodernism can't be refuted unless its historical premises can be refuted. He, however, doesn't refute the premises, but rather abruptly ends the book there. I'm afraid that its because the proper refutation cannot be done. Kant hit a dead blow when he showed that objective reality must forever be close to us, to us creatures bound by our limited senses. Denial of this premise doesn't make any rational or scientific sense to me.

Jake Desyllas says

Why did an anti-enlightenment, anti-reason movement called "postmodernism" develop in the mid 20th century? And why were all the leading theorists of postmodernism from the far left wing of politics? Hicks presents a brilliant answer to these questions in a very clear and easy to read style. He argues that postmodernism emerged as a rhetorical strategy of committed socialists once the failure of socialism could no longer be ignored. Rather than change their views, many devoted socialists chose to move the goalposts. Instead of acknowledging flaws in socialist theory, they rejected logical consistency itself. Instead of acknowledging that socialist countries failed to raise living standards whereas capitalist economies did, they changed the critique of capitalism to be all about relative inequality. The result is postmodernism: an anti-rational critique of the entire enlightenment project. Postmodernism is a mess of contradictions, but Hicks' analysis makes sense of it. Also, you can get both the book and audiobook free on his website! <http://www.stephenhicks.org/publicati...>

Bukk says

By titling this book Explaining Postmodernism, Hicks is being overly gentle toward the postmodernist dogma, since his handling of the material warrants the more apt title of Exposing and Vanquishing Postmodernism. Word for word, page for page, this is the most substantial and coherent philosophy text I've read. Where other philosophy works will waste time and space and become bogged down in semantics and jargon and insider lingo, this book cuts straight to the point with powerfully worded and clearly written prose that doesn't waste your time or attempt to impress you with the superficial.

Hicks presents a well researched history of the intellectual thought that brought us the Enlightenment, and provides an equally compelling and well informed history of what would become the anti-intellectual response to modernism's Enlightenment: postmodernism. He fleshes it out with the thinkers responsible for such dogmatic and irrational modes of thinking, and outlines their chain of influence and the perplexing logic they espouse in the face of reality.

An anti-intellectual trend that I thought had merely existed for a few decades in fact has roots reaching back over a hundred years, sometimes coming from not so wild or radical sources. But the transformation of once thoughtful ideas into their reactionary and irrational components, particularly within different cultural contexts, designed specifically to deflect the logical criticisms of socialism's weaknesses by developing an inherently useless and contradictory process of anti-logic, can lead to some bizarre conclusions that are not only unable to explain anything within view of objective reality, but are celebrated for their inability to do so. For it is postmodernism's driving purpose to bring weight and some form of credence to ideas and values that are fundamentally flawed, and that are incapable of being defended through established modes of logic and reason. Doing so requires the abandonment of reason and the adoption of child like and amateurish thinking that I think can only be summarized as anti-thinking.

Postmodernism, as an ideology, a philosophy, a mode of thought, is a conundrum that provides nothing of value to intellectual discourse, and prides itself in that, for only through irrational pseudointellectual hogwash is postmodernism capable of forwarding the ideas it holds sacred. Hicks factually and carefully explains the origins and causes of postmodern thought and how it has become an unfortunate cornerstone in much modern thought.

Postmodernism's irrationality and deep seated confusion about knowledge is only the beginning, as anyone who's had the misfortune of engaging with postmodern practitioners will confess. The plethora of counterproductive subfields developed in the realm of PM, the intellectually irresponsible academics who

perpetuate faulty takes on our senses and our ability to understand our world, the near infinite pages of vapid circular reasoning and bad philosophy practiced by its adherents, the countless abuses of, and attacks on, science and scientific rationality, among so many other things, are some of the sad fashions that are championed by the distraction known as postmodernism.

Hicks expertly lays out the main paradigms of postmodernism and exposes them as honestly and accurately as I imagine is possible. The far reaches of PM thinking is illustrated, via cultural studies, feminism, collectivism, banal concepts like deconstructionism, sociology and power dynamics, and its partial origins in Marxism. Hicks doesn't waste time or space or words, he wants you to understand fundamentally the doctrines and the contradictions and the failures and the shortcomings of one of the most prominent, but certainly not long relevant, intellectual trends to come about. The informed individual is capable of making informed decisions. This is a simple idea postmodernism wouldn't agree with, but it's this idea that will eventually lead to postmodernism becoming the laughing stock mullet of philosophy.

James says

This book is an excellent introduction to both the philosophical foundations of Postmodernism and the history of its battle with the Enlightenment outlook. The author analyzes the views of specific philosophers who provided the ideas that led to contemporary postmodern thinkers; including brief summaries of the views of each. Comparative charts are provided along the way that are helpful in assessing different views and changes in philosophy over time. He elucidates the links between the ideas of philosophers and makes connections; for example, he identifies the nexus between postmodern thinkers and leftism. The book is structured with four chapters on intellectual history preceded by an introductory essay on the definition of Postmodernism, and followed by a concluding section that comments on the current state of affairs. While critical of the post-modern project, it is a thorough and fair presentation of Postmodernism from a pro-enlightenment individualist point of view.

Martin Rundkvist says

Hicks's history of Kantian philosophy is competent, but his constant Ayn Rand libertarian attacks on the Left are tiresome. Turns out that when he says "socialism collapsed", he means "Michel Foucault felt disillusioned when he learned about Stalin's mass murders in the late 50s".

Douglas Wilson says

Stephen Hicks is some sort of Objectivist or Randian, and so that should be said right up front. And this means I do not know how he managed to get that many rocks onto his magic epistemological carpet, and still less do I know how he got it to fly like that. But let us assume his craft was flight-worthy . . . Hicks spent the entire book beaning postmodernists with rocks. He has a good arm, and is a nice shot. I haven't enjoyed a book this much in quite some time.

Hicks provides an essential service here -- he shows the connections between postmodern theory and hard Leftist politics. Here is his thesis: "The failure of epistemology made postmodernism possible, and the

failure of socialism made postmodernism necessary.."

Omar Ali says

A very lucid and devastating critique of contemporary postmodernism. The author (or so it seems, I am not familiar with his other works) is pro-individual, pro-liberty and pro-capitalist, but even if you disagree with all three, you will find this book useful. The survey of the roots of modern postmodernism in earlier anti-enlightenment philosophies is very informative and well worth reading.

And its only 4.99 on kindle, so you can put it on your phone and read bits and pieces at leisure (which is more or less what I did).

Mahmoud Awad says

Another comical presentation of that fundamental libertarian inability to differentiate Nazism from Bolshevism. Shape your expectations accordingly.

Dan Rera says

Good book. Some flaws but, in the end, an interesting read.

I didn't care for his encapsulation of Kant and the transcendentalist endeavor. He didn't seem to grasp the power of Hume's criticism/empiricism. Hicks would rather put the blame on Kant's shoulders (in part, it seems, simply because Kant is German and it fits better into his Anglo vs Continental dichotomy) than dignify that Hume was the real problem child of empiricism and that Locke's dogmatism was, to many, incapable of withstanding the strength of Hume's skepticism. In this way, it might be fair enough to say that Kant destroyed philosophy in order to save it, but to argue that everything was hunky-dory before Kant wrote the Critique is simply false.

Also, there is an ever-present subtext of appeal to motive throughout the whole book. Kant sacrificed objectivity to save religion from empiricism. Kierkegaard sacrificed reason to also save religion from scrutiny. Heidegger folds in being with nothingness because of self-loathing. And, finally, postmodernists destroy language and, by extension reason, to prevent substantive demonstration of the validity of capitalism as triumphant over socialism (or, in other words, to prevent the effective rejection of utopian idealism). Hicks refuses to believe than anyone involved in the transition from Kant and Rousseau to Derrida and Rorty believed that they were genuinely involved in a passionate search for truth. Each was an opportunist, a sophist, trying to wring political, theological, and economic consequences from the bowels of epistemology, ontology, and linguistics. A stretch, to say the least.

At the same time, he does a great job showing the would-be enormous coincidence that nearly all postmodernist thinkers are leftist collectivists. Instead of merely marveling at this phenomenon, Hicks delves into the thought and shows, quite powerfully, the connection between the historical development of differing strains of anti-liberal, collectivist political movements and the corresponding ideologies utilized to support them. Linking the zeitgeist between politics and philosophy isn't the real selling point here; it's showing how, when various anti-liberal movements fail to achieve their utopian ideal, committed utopians will

construct elaborate philosophical frameworks to side-step the conclusion that collectivist utopianism is inferior to liberal capitalism. By his account, major strands of contemporary philosophy are simply no-true-Scotsman-esque reworking to preserve a conception of man's perfectibility through the state. The most recent manifestation, deconstruction and absurdism, is just an overwrought tantrum of the utter failures of socialist implementation over the last 150 years. The author suggests that their strategy is based, in the words of Nietzsche, on the following motivation: "When some men fail to accomplish what they desire to do, they exclaim angrily, 'May the whole world perish!' This repulsive emotion is the pinnacle of envy, whose implication is, 'If I cannot have something, no one is to have anything, no one is to be anything!'"

Ultimately, the author paints with broad brushes but makes a compelling enough point throughout that he can be excused for glossing over some detail at times. He is writing a polemic about an enormous subject that is designed to be accessible most readers, so I, at least, am willing to tolerate his seeming glibness. The purpose of the book is to make a compelling case that philosophy has been defined by political ideology, itself rooted in the dreams of willful men more interested in high-minded visions of human perfectibility than the murky lessons of actual history, and it achieves this purpose.

Mickey Hernandez says

If I could I would give this book a 4.5. It was a fantastic elucidation of traditional Marxist, Neo-Marxist, and Post-modernist ideas. It also provided a good amount of background from thinkers such as Rousseau, Kierkegaard, Kant, Nietzsche, and other authors who influenced 19th and 20th century thought. The criticism of Post-modernist and Marxist thought is, in my opinion, mostly sound. For my money, it identifies a lot of what is wrong, or at the very least, inefficient and inadequate, with some of the popular ideas that has permeated throughout 21st century society.

Sandra says

Explained the genesis and developments of postmodernist theory to philosophy-averse me. I never stayed up till 3am for a philosophy book before.

Rod Hollier says

Carl Jung used to say, 'People don't have ideas, ideas have their people.' Postmodernism has pierced the minds of its victims, possessed them and controlled them.

Postmodernism is filled with superstition and it's explicitly anti-science, anti-reason, and anti-logic.

The people that come up with these theories are truly pathological.

Postmodernism is the Alex Jones of philosophy.

Fredösphere says

A fascinating thesis, with two surprising claims. First that postmodernism's abandonment of reason is the endpoint of a line of philosophy that begins with Kant, who (in Hick's account) was the first to denigrate reason. Ironically, Kant was attempting to carve out a safe space (pun intended) for religious faith. But without reason to partner with faith, faith can become capricious and egoistic. Second, the crisis of socialism provided the need for postmodernism's leap into the dark of nihilism.

Postmodernists have, up to now, been uniformly people of the left. The capitalist/globalist engine of growth, despite its inequality and seeming indifference to individuals, has performed an unprecedented humanitarian act in the last 50 years by lifting vast numbers of people out of miserable poverty.

With the very recent rise of a nihilistic, anti-liberty, populist right, postmodernism may be getting a balance and, dare I say egalitarianism, it never wanted. Hicks book is a bit too old to address this startling change, so I will: just as the left lost its religion a century ago and turned to nihilism, so now (in Western countries) is the right. It's not a pretty sight.

Martina says

What an awful, awful book. Equating postmodernists with leftists and then claiming they 'more often than others' (who the fuck is others?), engage in authoritarian 'political correctness' and more often incorporate rage and anger in their argumentation.

Oh and for the love of christ on a crutch Dvorkin *never said that*. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intercou...>

Ben De Bono says

This might be one of the most important books for understanding our world today. Postmodern thought has been making inroads into the mainstream of western culture for decades, but we're only now beginning to see how pernicious it actually is. Its claims and strategies aren't easy to understand - let alone combat - unless you understand its philosophical pedigree. Stephen Hicks does a phenomenal job in laying that out in a way that's extremely readable without sacrificing depth.

The book came out in 2004 but it feels far more relevant today. I'd be curious to see what Hicks thinks of the rise of Trump in the US and the revival of nationalism across Europe. Part of his thesis is that postmodernism rose from the ashes of left wing socialism (and especially communism's) failures in the 20th century. The failure of left wing socialism was gradual and allowed for its basic tenets to adjust and survive and morph into postmodernism. Right wing socialism, on the other hand, failed so spectacularly in the form of European fascism that there was no time or moral opportunity for anything other than a few fringe groups to carry forward its ideas. At least in the US, that opened the way for the conservative movement to become a conglomeration of anti-postmodernists. The right was invested - to various degrees - in the tenets of liberal democracy and the preservation of western civilization.

In my view, that may very well be changing. Just as the left was taken over by postmodernist thought following the 1960's, the right seems poised to do the same. With Trump the American right has made a

major gamble that goes far beyond his temperament or competence for the presidency. The gamble is that he won't usher in the revival of right wing (national) socialism. To be clear, I'm not making the tired claim that Trump is some sort of neo-Nazi anymore than those on the left are communist authoritarians. However, just as the postmodern left is the heir to the failed philosophies of left wing socialism, Trump and the new wave of nationalism may prove to be the heirs of right wing socialism, thus ushering in a right wing version of postmodernism.

As someone convinced more than ever of how pernicious postmodern thought is, that scares the hell out of me. Right wing postmodernism will ultimately prove as hostile to western values as the left wing variety has turned out to be. The left has spent the better part of a century becoming nakedly hostile to western values. If the right follows suit, those of us who actually care about western culture will find ourselves in a very bad place.

If I've strayed from actually reviewing the book, it's only because this is the effect the work has. It will have you thinking long after you've put it down. I can't recommend it highly enough. Read it and then convince others to do likewise.