

## Postmodernism: The Decline of Truth

Joshua Landy in Philosophytalk.org 15 July 2019

Did postmodernism have any part to play in the rise of the post-truth era? At first glance that seems very hard to believe. When we see Kellyanne Conway talking about “alternative facts” or Rudy Giuliani saying “truth isn’t truth,” we don’t immediately assume they’ve been busy reading Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty. Still, maybe the question isn’t quite so simple.

For one thing, there are a few documented cases of right-wingers explicitly drawing on postmodernist theory. Take Vladislav Surkov, Kremlin ideologist. Or Phillip Johnson, one of the originators of the “intelligent design” idea. (“I told them I was a postmodernist and deconstructionist just like them,” said Johnson, “but aiming at a slightly different target.”) Or Mike Cernovich, an alt-right conspiracy theorist, who actually said the following: “I read postmodernist theory in college. If everything is a narrative, then we need alternatives to the dominant narrative. I don’t seem like a guy who reads Lacan, do I?”

And even when it comes to folks like Kellyanne Conway or Rudy Giuliani—people who almost certainly did not read any Lyotard—there is perhaps a case to be made for postmodernism having an effect, by creating an environment conducive to their flourishing. Kurt Andersen points out that postmodern ideas didn’t stay locked in the ivory tower but gradually circulated in the wider culture, convincing more and more people that each person has his or her own “truth,” and that it’s impolite (if not downright hegemonic) to say that someone is wrong. The result, according to Andersen? “Once the intellectual mainstream thoroughly accepted that there are many equally valid realities and truths, once the idea of gates and gatekeeping was discredited not just on campuses but throughout the culture, all American barbarians could have their claims taken seriously.” And thus “postmodern intellectuals... turned out to be useful idiots... for the American right.”

Andersen's suggestion, in other words, is that postmodernism helped to create an environment in which there was less pushback against the Conways and Gianianis—like a body with a depressed immune system. One or two philosophers seem to agree with this assessment. Daniel Dennett says the postmodernists “are responsible for the intellectual fad that made it respectable to be cynical about truth and facts”; Timothy Williamson says, “those who think it somehow intolerant to classify beliefs as true or false should be aware that they are making it easier for people like Trump, by providing them with a kind of smokescreen.” There could well be something to this, even if Donald Trump isn’t staying up all night poring over *The Postmodern Condition*.

Of course, the post-truth era has a host of other causes, many of which may well be more significant: the elimination of the fairness doctrine, the rise of 24-hour news, the internet, social media... But what if postmodernism also contributed, in its own modest way? Shouldn’t that be a reason for us to rethink how great an idea it was, and how vital a contribution to progressive politics? Richard Rorty once wrote that “the very idea of a ‘fact of the matter’ is one we would be better off without,” and that “science as the source of ‘truth’ [note the scare quotes!] is one of the Cartesian notions which will vanish” in the era

he was calling for. Well, we're living in that future right now, and it's not a utopia; it's a hellmouth. The dystopia we're currently living in should, in my view, make fans of postmodern theory think twice about their enthusiasm. They were wrong to hope for a world beyond truth.

At this point, defenders of postmodernism would probably make a couple of familiar responses. For one thing, they'd probably say that postmodernists were diagnosing the decline of truth, not asserting it, let alone calling for it. Well, that may be true of Baudrillard, but it's surely not true of Derrida, who famously claimed that words never transmit ideas but just defer meaning endlessly. And it's also not true of Richard Rorty, who said that "there is no sense in which any [scientific] description is an accurate representation of the way the world is." (As Bruno Latour pointed out, that kind of attitude is one that would make climate deniers very happy.) Rorty declared that "vocabularies... are not 'more objective' or 'less objective'" and that "objects are not 'more objectively' described in any vocabulary than in any other." Science, in other words, is no more objective than Scientology; astronomy is no more objective than astrology. When it came to "philosophy professors who are seeking the truth, not just a story or a consensus but an honest-to-God, down-home, accurate representation of the way the world is," Rorty thought it fun to call them "old-fashioned prigs." And he told us that someone reading a book shouldn't try to understand it correctly—there's no such thing—but only "beat the text into a shape which will serve his own purpose."

And it's not just what these thinkers said; it's what they did. Actions speak even louder than words, and postmodernists had a way of revealing just how committed they were to truthfulness. When caught in a bind over an article, Derrida insisted loudly on his rights as an author, forgetting everything he'd said about the evils of the copyright system ("I shall therefore not claim a copyright because this entire matter of the police must be reconsidered"). Similarly, when I once asked Rorty why he kept attributing a view to Nietzsche that Nietzsche didn't really have, he said "it just makes him into a more interesting and innovative philosopher." And the journal *Social Text* eagerly published an article which stated, among other deliberately egregious errors, that pi is a variable. At the end of the day, it's hard to accept with a straight face that claim that postmodernists were ultimately driven by a powerful love of truth. The fact that today's defenders of postmodernism are trying to rewrite history in this way—pretending Derrida and company never said the things they said—may perhaps reconfirm the suspicions some of us have that their commitment to honesty isn't entirely paramount.

The best argument for postmodernism, it seems to me, is that it sought to undermine the hegemony, in the intellectual world, of the white, male, heterosexual, Western standpoint. It revealed that purported claims to universality were often just a smokescreen for dangerously Eurocentric and hegemonic attitudes, and thus opened up a space for other ways of thinking to assert themselves and be taken seriously. This is an extremely noble aim, and the changes that have happened over the past decades have been vital and excellent. It's just not clear to me that we needed postmodernism in order to achieve this. As Anthony Appiah once put it, "their complaint is not with universalism at all. What they truly object to—and who would not?—is Eurocentric hegemony posing as universalism." It wasn't necessary to attack the very notion of universals, in other words, or the very notion of truth. When faced with lies posing as truths, we should just call them what they are, rather than claiming that there's no such thing as objective truth. Here Du Bois and

Beauvoir (among others) can be our models; we do not need the postmodernists.

Did postmodernism contribute to post-truth? We'll never know for sure. All we can be certain of is that insisting there's no truth, that claims of objectivity are always driven by interests of power, and that science is no more objective than Scientology is simply not going to help. We need to get the gatekeepers back at their gates. It's up to all of us.