



## INTRODUCTION: THE POSTMODERN PROBLEMATIC

What does it mean to be “postmodern” or reflect upon things in a “postmodern” way? The possible answers are numerous. The term “postmodern,” as well as its companions “postmodernity” and “postmodernism,” are used in relation to a wide variety of phenomena in and claims about art, architecture, literature, philosophy, society, and politics. What one decides to emphasize as important within this constellation will, of course, depend on one’s interests and intentions. Since there already exist numerous discussions that attempt to survey the field of things circulating under the various “post-” rubrics, I want to proceed directly to the drawing of some distinctions that will help provide initial bearings for those primarily concerned with ethics and politics.<sup>1</sup>

From this point of view, it is useful to distinguish first between oppositional and nonoppositional modes of postmodern thought and action.<sup>2</sup> This distinction is only a rough one, if for no other

1 Useful surveys are contained in the special issues on postmodernism of *Cultural Critique* 5 (Winter 1986–7) and *Theory, Culture and Society* No. 23 (June 1988); in Andrew Ross, ed. *Universal Abandon: The Politics of Postmodernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); in Wolfgang Iser, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne* (Weinheim: VCH, 1987); and in David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), ch. 3.

2 See Hal Foster, “Postmodernism: A Preface,” *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983), p. xii.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40948-3 - Political Theory and Postmodernism

Stephen K. White

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2 POLITICAL THEORY AND POSTMODERNISM

reason than that to be *postmodern* in any sense means to stand away from, or in opposition to, *something* modern. Nevertheless, the questioning and opposition of some thinkers runs deeper than that of others and has a more radical ethical–political edge. Perhaps the least oppositional mode of postmodern thought is manifested in much of what is taken in the United States to be postmodern architecture. The primary thing it opposes is a particular school of modernist architecture, the International Style. At its worst, this new stance boils down to a much greater acceptance of ornamentation on buildings and a penchant for mixing traditional styles with contemporary ones. But even within architecture, there are more oppositional ways of construing what it means to be postmodern; ways that question more thoroughly the dominant rules by which the modern architect has operated, and the standard ways architecture has been related to the dominant imperatives of political and economic systems.<sup>3</sup>

When one moves from architecture to philosophy and social theory, the asymmetry is reversed; the oppositional wing is far stronger. One reason for this is that the widely diffused post-structuralist methods developed by philosophers like Foucault and Derrida seem to dispose those who use them to a kind of perpetual criticism that cuts deeply and broadly into the foundations of modernity. It is this more oppositional sort of postmodern philosophical reflection that interests me.

What are the foundations or deep structures of modernity that postmodern philosophers attack? An answer to this question can quickly balloon to the same proportions as one about the meaning of “postmodern.” However, if one keeps the focus on what is most directly relevant to ethics and politics, an answer of manageable proportions can be sketched fairly easily. A first target of attack is the distinctive emphasis in modernity on a particular way in which human beings should relate to the world. In early modern thinkers such as Descartes and Hobbes, one sees this relation beginning to emerge clearly. The individual subject is conceived of as an isolated mind and will; and his vocation is to get clear about the world, to bring it under the

3 An interesting attempt to illustrate what is involved in a more radical notion of postmodern architecture is Bernard Tschumi, *Cinegramme Folie: Le Parc de la Villette* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Architectural Press, 1987). A useful overview of the more mainstream type of postmodern architecture is contained in Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, ch. 4.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40948-3 - Political Theory and Postmodernism

Stephen K. White

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE POSTMODERN PROBLEMATIC

3

control of reason and thus make it available for human projects. The modern world, says Derrida, stands under the imperative of giving a rational account of everything; or, as Foucault more ominously puts it, of interrogating everything.<sup>4</sup> This modern orientation toward a reason aimed at enhancing human will and control has no limits. It manifests itself finally in the twentieth century as a “will to planetary order.”<sup>5</sup>

Such a constellation of reason and will was a necessary precondition for the successful emergence of industrial capitalism in the nineteenth century. As critics in that century already saw quite clearly, capitalism was not just a new way of producing things, but also a logic of rationalization that corroded all traditions and called all aspects of social and cultural life to account. Moreover, the logic of capitalism became intertwined with the Enlightenment faith in material and moral progress. The legitimacy of the modern world thereafter anchored itself in the promise of “will as infinite enrichment,” on the one hand, and the promise of justice for the individual in the liberal state, on the other.<sup>6</sup>

These hallmarks of Western modernity, capitalism and the liberal state, came under radical attack from socialism and Marxism. However, from the point of view of postmodern thinkers, these criticisms did not cut deeply enough into the basic modern orientation of reason and will. Thus Marxism becomes just as much a target of postmodern attack as capitalism and the liberal state. In Marxism the will to mastery is merely transferred to a collective level: to the will of the proletariat to master history. And the rationality behind this will ends up manifesting itself in the twentieth century in the form of those immense bureaucratic states for which the Soviet Union was the first model. The threat of the possessive individual will and the corrosive logic of capitalism was to be tamed; but the tamer became a new threat. The promise of worker emancipation from capitalism thus ended up merely giving the screw of will and reason a further turn.

4 See especially Derrida, “The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils,” *Diacritics* XIX (Fall 1983), pp. 7ff.

5 Heidegger, *Hölderlins Hymnen “Germanien” und “Der Rhein,”* Vol. 39, *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1980), p. 23 and *Hölderlins Hymne “Der Ister,”* Vol. 53, *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1984), p. 59.

6 Jean-François Lyotard, “Rules and Paradoxes and Svelte Appendix,” *Cultural Critique* 5 (Winter 1986–7), p. 215.

#### 4 POLITICAL THEORY AND POSTMODERNISM

The questioning of modern foundations is not something occurring only in the pages of academic texts. The claim of post-moderns is that it is happening as well out there in society. Exactly what is happening and to what degree, however, is a matter of dispute. Use of the term “postmodernity” seems to imply that so much of modernity’s cognitive and social structures have changed that we can speak of a new historical period. But that claim is probably too strong. Perhaps most would see the sorts of changes we are experiencing as putting us in a situation of “post-modern modernity.”<sup>7</sup> This implies that our modernity is riven by phenomena that are not easily comprehended within familiar cognitive and social structures. If the term is awkward and ambiguous, so is the social reality it claims to describe.<sup>8</sup>

As a way of keeping an emphasis on such ambiguity and uncertainty, I want to refer to the phenomena at issue here with the term “postmodern problematic.” Four interrelated phenomena constitute the bulk of this problematic: the increasing incredulity toward metanarratives, the growing awareness of new problems wrought by societal rationalization, the explosion of new informational technologies, and the emergence of new social movements. Together these phenomena constitute an uncertain mixture of challenges, dilemmas, and opportunities that form a distinctive context for contemporary ethical–political reflection.<sup>9</sup>

##### I. Increasing incredulity toward metanarratives

Perhaps the most well-known short description of postmodernism is that provided by Jean-François Lyotard: “incredulity to-

<sup>7</sup> I use here part of the title of Wolfgang Iser’s very useful book, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne*.

<sup>8</sup> Derrida maintains that the security of all that is near and dear “is trembling today” in “The Ends of Man,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, ed. and trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 133. For a work that orients itself around a Foucault-inspired analysis of ambiguity, see William Connolly, *The Politics of Ambiguity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> My stress on the ambiguity and uncertainty characteristic of “our postmodern modernity” should not be understood as denying that a certain degree of trembling and casting about for self-reassurance has accompanied modern consciousness, at least since the French Revolution. See Habermas’s argument in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. by Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987). However, even Habermas is struck by the “new obscurity” of our situation. See his “The New Obscurity,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 11 (Winter 1986), pp. 1–18.

## THE POSTMODERN PROBLEMATIC

5

ward metanarratives.”<sup>10</sup> By “metanarratives” or “master narratives,” Lyotard means those foundational interpretive schemes that have constituted the ultimate and unquestioned sources for the justification of scientific–technological and political projects in the modern world. Such narratives, focusing on God, nature, progress, and emancipation, are the anchors of modern life.

Lyotard has emphasized that he is describing not so much a new historical period as “a mood, or better a state of mind.”<sup>11</sup> It may be useful to draw a further distinction at this point, one that I think is not entirely foreign to Lyotard’s intentions. In a narrow sense, one can speak of a resistant state of mind shared by intellectuals and ordinary people alike who feel dominated by, and work to combat, the way modern metanarratives represent reality. For philosophers and social theorists, this state of mind manifests itself in such methods of critique as genealogy and deconstruction. Although this resistance is sharpest in the work of contemporary French philosophers, it is a mistake to see it as limited to them. Without blending out the distinctiveness of their contribution, it is important to keep in mind how broad the current of incredulity has become in the post–World War II era.

In the late 1940s, the ideal of the good life spawned by infinite scientific–technological progress was subjected to penetrating critiques by Martin Heidegger, as well as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno.<sup>12</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, deeply embedded metanarratives surrounding the relations of men and women came under unprecedented attack from feminists.<sup>13</sup> The liberal tradition as a whole also found itself in philosophi-

10 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xxiv.

11 Lyotard, “Rules and Paradoxes and Svelte Appendix.” pp. 209–10.

12 Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. by William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1969); and Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by John Cumings (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

13 For a sampling of the feminist challenge, see Alison Jagger and Paula T. Rothenberg, eds., *Feminist Frameworks: Alternative Theoretical Accounts of the Relations Between Women and Men*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984). For a recent consideration of feminism and traditional metanarratives in relation to postmodernism, see Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson, “Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism,” in Linda J. Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40948-3 - Political Theory and Postmodernism

Stephen K. White

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 6 POLITICAL THEORY AND POSTMODERNISM

cal question during the 1970s and 1980s. Although critiques of liberalism were hardly new, those that arose in the wake of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* generated a new level of uncertainty for that tradition and its perspective on justice. Here I am referring in particular to the attacks leveled at the notion of universally valid "primary goods" that formed the cornerstone of Rawls's original account of justice. The critiques of this notion have forced liberals to see that the diversity of basic goods is a much deeper problem than they had thought, and thus that the problem of just institutions is also more complex.<sup>14</sup> Marxism, the traditional Western answer to the failures of liberalism, has itself been brought under greater suspicion than ever before, as I suggested earlier. This suspicion goes deeper than the classical critiques, because it locates difficulties in Marxism even when it is interpreted in a sympathetic way.<sup>15</sup> The result of these recent critiques is to make Marxism look far too much in complicity with our modern productivist culture and its conceptual anchors.<sup>16</sup>

One thing that emerges from all these instances of mounting incredulity is a heightened awareness of how strongly Western thought is oriented to the consciousness of a subject (singular or collective) who is faced with the task of surveying, subduing, and negotiating *his* way through a world of objects, other subjects, and his own body. Here, of course, is where recent French thought has applied itself most persistently, trying to show both how our traditional modes of thinking privilege the rational, willful subject and what costs this entails.

The resistant state of mind often manifests itself among post-moderns in a way that is maximally "impertinent" to the shibboleths of modernity. The rationale for this tone is to shock or jolt the addressee into seeing the contestable quality of what he takes

14 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971). For the critiques, see especially Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); and Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

15 A typical classical critique is Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949).

16 For a sample of recent critiques, see Habermas, "Remarks on Hegel's Jena Philosophy," in *Theory and Practice*, trans. by John Viertel (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973); and Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. by Charles Levin (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981), and *The Mirror of Production*, trans. by Mark Poster (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40948-3 - Political Theory and Postmodernism

Stephen K. White

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE POSTMODERN PROBLEMATIC

7

as a certainty.<sup>17</sup> But there is a danger when the resistant state of mind lets this tone predominate. What I mean by this is that there is sometimes a loss of attention to a broader, more diffuse “state of mind” that inheres in our postmodern modernity. Here Lyotard’s first choice of terms, “mood,” is perhaps more apt. It is this mood and the attempts to turn it in an affirmative direction that constitute the most subtle challenge to modern ethical–political reflection. The mood is partially anxious and melancholy: Postmodern reflection knows we really are “homeless.” But such reflection also often manifests the feeling that somehow there is something affirmative emerging, something to be celebrated. Nietzsche is frequently looked to for insights at this point. Without implying that that is the wrong source, I am going to look rather to Heidegger. I will try to draw out of his work an initial sense of this peculiarly ambiguous mood of melancholy/delight and show how it might help in understanding what learning to be at home in homelessness might mean.

## II. New awareness of dangers of societal rationalization

The erosion of the credibility of foundational metanarratives has increasingly helped bring into sharper focus a social and political problem of vast proportions. The costs of Western modernization or rationalization are being progressively reestimated upward. Prominent among such reevaluations are Foucault’s analysis of the process of “normalization,” Habermas’s of “the colonization of the lifeworld,” and Lyotard’s of the logic of “performativity.”<sup>18</sup> These reevaluations draw attention to (among other things) prob-

17 I borrow the term “impertinence,” as well as the explanation of its systematic role in postmodern thinking, from Michael Shapiro, “Weighing Anchor: Postmodern Journeys from the Life-World,” in Stephen K. White, ed., *Life-World and Politics: Between Modernity and Postmodernity* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), pp. 146ff. Shapiro emphasizes only the “benefits” of impertinence; I wish, however, to indicate as well a potential “cost” that sometimes threatens to disable some of the best insights postmodernism offers.

18 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Random House, 1977), pp. 170, 182–4, 208–9, 222, 224; *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, *An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 1980), Part Five; Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, *Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), Ch. 8; and Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, pp. 47–67.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40948-3 - Political Theory and Postmodernism

Stephen K. White

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 8 POLITICAL THEORY AND POSTMODERNISM

lems associated with the growth of the welfare activities of the modern state. They recognize that, however benevolent these activities may be in intention, the discourses and institutions that emerge with them often promote a deep and progressive disempowerment of their clients. For theorists from the center to the left, this insight signals a need for thorough self-reexamination. It must be emphasized, however, that such an insight is not equivalent to the standard conservative warnings about the evils of modern state power. It is different because it is coupled with a recognition that the discourses and institutions of corporate capitalism also participate in a logic of disempowerment. And it is only this *dual* concern that characterizes the recognition of a postmodern problematic.

This questioning of the welfare state is also different from traditional Marxist critiques, since the latter gained their plausibility and normative bite from assumptions about the superiority of an alternative form of society. For those who take the postmodern problematic seriously, the comfort of such assumptions is not available, since there is little reason to believe that such whole cloth alternatives will not blindly reproduce disempowering modes of rationalization under new guises.<sup>19</sup> A serious confrontation with the postmodern challenge thus requires one to be, paradoxically, both more radical and less radical when considering political alternatives.

## III. New informational technologies

A third element of the postmodern problematic is the rise of new informational technologies, by which I mean all forms of media, beginning especially with television, that vastly enhance the circulation of images and information. From my perspective, what makes these technologies problematic is their political ambivalence.<sup>20</sup> On the one hand, they are often seen as instruments for

<sup>19</sup> Here one can see the difference between current critiques of societal rationalization and earlier ones emerging out of the Marxist tradition, such as Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964). However far Marcuse was from orthodox Marxism, it was his faith in the possibility of a totally different society that breathed life into his critiques.

<sup>20</sup> Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, pp. 66–7; Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, pp. 571–3; and Timothy Luke, “Informationalism and Ecology,” *Telos* 56 (Summer 1983), pp. 59–73.

The dimensions of informationalization and societal rationalization are



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40948-3 - Political Theory and Postmodernism

Stephen K. White

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE POSTMODERN PROBLEMATIC

9

empowering individuals, a view clearly evident in the IBM television commercial in the 1980s that showed a Charlie Chaplin look-alike bringing his life into order with the help of a personal computer. The message, of course, was that because of new informational technology, postmodern times will be better than modern times. A parallel view holds that the decentralizing potential of some of the newest technology can also enhance the prospects for radically democratizing political life.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, informational technology is just as often seen as the instrument of an emerging Big Brother or a potent new ideological apparatus of corporate capitalism. What these opposing views have in common is an agreement on the power of such technologies to structure the consciousness and self-identity of individuals and groups. What they disagree about is the question of who will likely control these technologies and what purposes they will serve.

But to state the issue so baldly is to miss the full extent of the ambiguities involved. Certainly one can envision greater possibilities for democratized forms of control in micro- as opposed to macrocomputers, in decentralizing advances in videotextology, desktop publishing, and so forth; but even assuming some progressive potential here, it is likely that most informational technology will remain linked to large institutions, both public and private, and thus to the expansion of societal rationalization. Therefore it might appear that such technology will in fact function more as a potent means for enhancing the ideological control of dominant groups or classes. But again, such a straightforward reading of informationalization underplays the ambiguities and obscurities involved. Perhaps the problem is better seen not so much in terms of a single hegemonic code of “bourgeois ideology” into which we are socialized, but rather in terms of a proliferation of codes.<sup>22</sup> The crucial questions then become how

especially emphasized by Mark Poster in his useful attempt to understand contemporary social reality in a way that employs the insights of post-structuralism to supplement the sort of critique traditionally associated with the Frankfurt School; see *Critical Theory and Poststructuralism: In Search of a Context* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989).

21 See Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), ch. 10.

22 On the fragmentation and diffusion of consciousness, see David Held, “Crisis Tendencies, Legitimation and the State,” in John Thompson and David Held, eds., *Habermas: Critical Debates* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982), pp. 189ff; and *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, pp. 354–5.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40948-3 - Political Theory and Postmodernism

Stephen K. White

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 10 POLITICAL THEORY AND POSTMODERNISM

this proliferation is structured, which cognitive and behavioral scripts are privileged, and which segments of society are systematically advantaged or disadvantaged in the process.

If considerations such as these have any validity, then the informational revolution adds new and perplexing dimensions to the rethinking of questions of power, ideology, freedom, and justice, a rethinking that has already become more obscure in light of the problems emerging from the upward reestimation of the costs of societal rationalization.

## IV. New social movements

The fourth phenomenon is the appearance of new values and “new social movements” in Western industrialized societies.<sup>23</sup> Social scientists have for some time been calling attention to the emergence of “postmaterialist values” and new sorts of groups, for whom politics is not in the first instance a matter of compensations that the corporate economy

or welfare state can provide, but of defending and restoring endangered ways of life. In short, the new conflicts are not ignited by *distribution problems*, but by questions having to do with the *grammar of forms of life*.<sup>24</sup>

The women’s movement, antinuclear movement, radical ecologists, ethnic movements, homosexuals, and countercultural groups in general all share, at least to some degree, this new status, even if they differ in many substantive ways. They all have a somewhat defensive character, as well as a focus on struggling to gain the ability to construct socially their own collective identity, characteristics that make them rather anomalous in relation to the standard rules for interest group behavior in the modern state. On the other hand, though, they are just as anomalous for Marxian-influenced theories of the left that continually seek the social embodiment of a revolutionary subjectivity that

23 On “new social movements,” see the special issue of *Social Research* on this topic, especially the article by Jean Cohen, “Strategy of Identity: New Theoretical Paradigms and Contemporary Social Movements,” *Social Research* 52 (Winter 1985), pp. 663–716. On “postmaterialist” values, see Ronald Inghart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles among Western Publics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977).

24 Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2., p. 392; my emphasis.