

# **Our Postmodern Milieu**

## **What is it, Where did it Come from, and How to Recover Our Senses**

**By**  
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Since early times, philosophers have widely believed that we are social animals, that our need for companionship, acceptance, and cooperation with others is one of our species' most defining qualities. But how we socialize can manifest in both healthy and unhealthy ways, in beneficial and harmful ways, in ethical and unethical ways. Our friendships, relationships, and our societies at large can be based on mutual care and respect, or on selfishness and dominance. They can be based on cooperation or control, on peace or violence, on freedom or fear, on reason or madness, on love—in which we desire and work for the growth and wellbeing of others—or on greed and self-centeredness—in which we consider others as a means or threat to our own ends.

Of course, these divisions are seldom clean. Most of us engage with different people and peoples in different ways, often reserving our best social behavior for those we most love or who are most like us, while being less friendly and sometimes even hostile toward those we consider strangers, unrelated, or different from us. On the other hand, behind closed doors, some may treat those closest to them—those who know them best—with cruelty and control, while presenting themselves as kind and generous to the rest of the world.

On a larger societal scale, we may be at peace or at war. We may establish democracies or dictatorships. We may put up border walls or welcome refugees and immigrants. We may be nationalists or cosmopolitan. We may cloister into small identity groups or consider ourselves part of one human family. I agree with the philosophers, that we are fundamentally social animals. Just this week I heard a former chemist turned Episcopalian priest suggest that our need to connect with others is rooted in our very DNA, which is held together by chemical bonds. These chemical bases pair together in different ways, yet, together, have given shape to all manner of beings. So how we pair together, how we bond, how we socialize makes a huge difference in determining what our communities, societies, and our world will look like, just as the minutest differences in DNA bonding can determine whether we turn out to be a human being or a fruit fly.

All of this is to simply say that we may be social animals who are dependent upon our relationships with others, but how we socialize matters! It matters because it determines what kind of world we live in. It matters because it determines what kind of community we live in. It matters because it determines the kind of personal relationships we have. And it matters because it determines the kind of person we are. How we socialize can make all the difference in the world. To date, the best way of socializing has proven to be that which is rooted in the humanistic ethic, first articulated during the Enlightenment by Immanuel Kant who said, "*no person should ever be a means to somebody else's ends but should be considered an end within themselves.*" This ethic was refined during the French Revolution into the form we're most familiar with today, *the inherent worth and dignity of every person*, which is imbedded in many democratic constitutions and is our liberal religion's first principle. I also appreciate Erich Fromm's mid-20<sup>th</sup> century definition of the humanistic ethic, stating that "*the sole criterion of ethical value being [human] welfare*"<sup>1</sup> and "that

the unfolding and growth of every person [should be] the aim of all social and political activities.”<sup>2</sup> This definition covers both the bottom half of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, our general human welfare, and the upper half of the pyramid, the unfolding of individual potential. To me, any relationship, whether amongst family and friends, between a government and its citizens, among identity groups, or between nations, that don’t prioritize both human welfare and individual unfolding are failures.

Following those periods of history in which the humanistic ethic was followed, humanity has progressed and flourished. In Western culture, these periods followed the Early Greek philosophers, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment. As Harvard professor Steven Pinker says, “Intellectual liberalism was at the forefront of many forms of progress that almost everyone has come to accept, such as democracy, social insurance, religious tolerance, the abolition of slavery and judicial torture, the decline of war, and the expansion of human and civil rights.”<sup>3</sup> It was also during this period that Enlightenment figures like Montesquieu, Voltaire, Cesare Beccaria, and Jeremy Bentham began calling for the decriminalization of homosexuality. All of this led to a humanitarian revolution that, increasingly since the 1950s, has caused, as Pinker says, “a cascade of Rights Revolutions: civil rights, women’s rights, gay rights, children’s rights, and animal rights.”<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, it was also in the 1950s that another kind of thinking began taking hold, beginning in the American academy, that today seems to have penetrated and captured many of what were once our most liberal institutions. I’m talking about *postmodernism*. Although it finally took hold then, the mindset leading to postmodernism has been around a lot longer, almost since the Enlightenment itself, and is rooted in what is often called the counter-Enlightenment. Enlightenment historian, Richie Robertson says this term refers to “a group of thinkers who denied the supremacy of reason and pleaded for the importance of feeling; Who were interested not in universal civilization, but in local and particular cultures; who thought that polished modern culture suppressed the creative energies of primitive ages and of uneducated peoples.” These were “ideas in the nineteenth century,” he says, “that eventually fed into fascism.”<sup>5</sup>

I think this definition is particularly important because it makes the point that postmodernism seeks to return humanity to a primitive state based upon a false and romanticized image of how good life was before the advent of human civilization, rooted in a mythical belief in what the 18<sup>th</sup> century counter-Enlightenment thinker Jean Jacque Rousseau termed the “noble savage.” Many, inspired by Rousseau, romanticized how good life would be if we could all return to nature and live as free as wild animals do. But even Rousseau knew it would not be possible for human beings to ever abandon civilization. So, instead, he thought we should do our best to imitate such freedom by creating a society in which everyone yields to the greater will of the whole, strictly enforced by the state or other powers-that-be. “Whoever refuses to obey the general will,” he said, “will be forced to do so by the entire body, this means merely that [they] will be forced to be free.”<sup>6</sup>

Rousseau also coined the term *social contract*, which has been summarized by Bertrand Russell to mean, “Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the

general will, and, in our corporate capacity, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, we can see the seeds of fascism, the notion that the authorities, and society as a whole, have the moral justification to force everyone to think alike for what is considered their own good and for the betterment of society at large, all based on a fictional idea of the past and a utopian vision of the future.

I want to get back to what I consider the most disturbing qualities just this small bit of history tells us about *our* postmodern milieu. But first, it’s important to understand more about how we ended up where we are today. As philosopher Stephen Hicks says in his informative book, *Explaining Postmodernism*, “By most accounts we have entered a new intellectual age. We are postmodern now.”<sup>8</sup> It may have begun centuries ago, but this illiberal, counter Enlightenment mindset has only recently come into its own.

Hicks begins his book by contrasting, not post, but premodernism with modernism. Modern thinkers are modern, he says, “because of their philosophical naturalism, their profound confidence in reason, and ... their individualism.”<sup>9</sup> When applied to politics, for example, modernism inevitably leads to democracy, which “is the principle of decentralizing power to individuals.”<sup>10</sup> Modern thinking stresses individual autonomy, individual character, individual sovereignty, individual value, and individual freedom, along with accepting perception and reason as the primary means of understanding and knowing. Pre-modernism emphasized supernatural explanations of nature that relied on “tradition, faith, and mysticism.”<sup>11</sup> Instead of human character, it emphasized human evil, like original sin. And, instead of freedom and human worth, it emphasized feudalism and subordination to greater authorities than oneself—the Church, the State, the Monarch, and so forth.<sup>12</sup>

Hicks also contrasts modernism with postmodernism, explaining that the modern belief about the underlying nature of reality is, firstly, that there is such a thing as universal reality and that it can be best understood by studying nature. Postmodernism does not accept the existence of a universal reality. The modern understanding of truth is that there is such a thing as truth that is universal and can be objectively explored through reason and experience. Postmodernism rejects the universal and objective nature of truth, believing all truth is subjective. Oddly, this seems to mean, at least for the postmodernist, that no truth is true and that all truths are true, a contradiction that makes no logical sense. Yet, this doesn’t matter because, unlike the modernist, the postmodernist rejects, even despises, logic and reason. When it comes to ethics, Hicks further points out, the modernist, as noted, is individualist, meaning what is right is what is good for the individual, even within the context of society. This means a society must be good to individuals, providing their needs and protecting their rights, because, as such, they have inherent value. But the postmodernist favors Rousseau’s collectivism, the idea that individuals have no purpose or existence beyond the collective and that one’s individual needs and desires must be sacrificed for the good of all, including their freedoms and rights.

Postmodernism, again, is rooted in the 18<sup>th</sup> century counter Enlightenment movement. So, just as the Enlightenment is alternatively described as the Age of Reason, the counter Enlightenment is largely defined by its rejection, even hatred, of reason. Hicks says, of all people, this began with Immanuel Kant who first questions reason's ability to get us to the truth. But it was Rousseau who inspired other thinkers, especially some of the most prominent German philosophers, to also reject reason in favor of faith and feelings. "The irrationalists divided over whether religion is true," Hicks says. "Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard being theists, and Schopenhauer and Nietzsche being atheists—but all shared a contempt for reason. All condemned reason as a totally artificial and limited faculty, one that must be abandoned in the bold quest to embrace reality ... That left other options open to us: faith, feeling, and instinct."<sup>13</sup> Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre are among those skeptics whose ideas suddenly became popular in the 1950's, beginning in American universities. Prior to this, there was far more emphasis upon the French Enlightenment philosophers. But the 1950s is when the light of modernism began to fade and postmodernism caught fire, first in the U.S., then abroad.

After this, philosophy soon became little more than linguistic analysis. This is so because postmodernism considers language, like reason, to ultimately be meaningless and unable to express any truth. Deconstruction of language, postmodernist Stanley Fish has said, "relieves me of the obligation to be right ... and demands only that I be interesting."<sup>14</sup> At the same time, postmodernists often seem obsessed with language and forcing everyone to say the right thing. It's a kind of linguistic puritanism. Its entire focus, its fix for everything, is to control what others say, which is another logical contradiction regarding those who think language has no real meaning.

And because they are group oriented, rather than individualistic, they believe they should, as postmodern thinker Richard Rorty says, "in practice privilege our own group."<sup>15</sup> This is why postmodernists seem to have little ethical problem weaponizing language against those with whom they disagree. "This explains the harsh nature of much postmodern rhetoric," Hicks says. "The regular deployments of *ad hominem*, the setting up of strawmen, and the regular attempts to silence opposing voices are all logical consequences of the postmodern epistemology of language."<sup>16</sup>

In fact, they see language as a form of oppression, which also contradicts the notion that it is meaningless. Since they don't believe in reason and logic, however, such contradiction is also of no concern. Hicks says, "Many deconstruct reason, truth, and reality because they believe that in the name of reason, truth, and reality, Western civilization has wrought dominance, oppression, and deconstruction."<sup>17</sup> As postmodernist Michel Foucault said, for example, "reason is the ultimate language of madness."<sup>18</sup> For, as philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard says, for the postmodernist, "Reason and power are one and the same,"<sup>19</sup> This is why postmodernism, according to liberal literary critic Frank Lentricchia, "seeks not to find the foundation and the conditions of truth but to exercise power for the purpose of social change."<sup>20</sup> Hence, "the task of the postmodern professor," he says, "is to help students 'spot, confront, and work against the political horrors of one's time.'"<sup>21</sup>

There is far more that can be said about postmodernism, but I think I've said enough for you to begin recognizing the similarity with the mindset many are currently referring to as "wokeism." Indeed, those ascribing to this mindset, have often come out of the postmodern academy, trained to right all the wrongs of the world by controlling the language of others in order to unseat those they imagine are the privileged and powerful. But this peculiar mindset, which many of us find irrational and shocking, isn't something new. It is the result of our postmodern milieu, which has been brewing in academia for nearly 70 years, long enough for many of its graduates to have entered leadership positions in some of our most liberal and progressive organizations, including the Unitarian Universalist Association.

This explains why, despite condemning me and my book, *The Gadfly Papers*, the only substantiated complaint against it is my general use of logic. In a public letter, hundreds of ministers stated, "We recognize that a zealous commitment to 'logic' and 'reason' over all other forms of knowing is one of the foundational stones of White Supremacy Culture." A month later, a letter of censure from the UU Ministers Association similarly said, "we cannot ignore the fact that logic has often been employed in white supremacy culture." For many, these assertions seem insane, and from a Enlightenment perspective they are. But they are also perfectly indicative of postmodernism, which, if Hicks is right, is the age we're now in.

I'll begin to conclude now by returning to what I said initially about the counter Enlightenment ideology. For it is there, in the origins of postmodernism, that I foresee its worst consequences. Firstly, it is rooted in the myth of the noble savage, its fictional yet ideal kind of person. This vision, therefore, doesn't seek the progression of humanity, but it's digression. It is about going back to a primitive state in which reason and empiricism, including science, must be subservient to our feelings, instincts, superstitions, and faiths. In its rejection of individual freedom and rights, it is collectivist, meaning individual beliefs and behaviors must be suppressed according to the general will as interpreted and enforced by the authorities. This is the mindset that has led, as mentioned earlier, to periods of fascism, from Nazism to McCarthyism, as well as in Bolshevik Russia and Maoist China, which are among the worst of many historical examples. The first things such regimes often do is arrest or kill their intellectuals, those who might use reason to argue against their insanity, and take control of the media in order to control the narrative. This hatred of reason and freedom of expression is among the most self-serving qualities of postmodernism, indicative of a mindset that itself must recognize on some level that its irrational beliefs are unsubstantiated and indefensible. This is why postmodernists are most often intolerant of those who disagree with them, resulting in immediately attacking the motives and character of their opponents rather than engaging with their arguments.

What is often called *wokeism* today is really but a particular manifestation of postmodernism and its rejection of modernism, which is just another term for Enlightenment liberalism. Yet, again, it has only been the results of such liberalism that human society has ever been able to make progress, including the kind of social advances regarding the equality and rights of others that postmodernism claims to want. Today, especially, as social creatures we have to ask how we want

to socialize? Do we want to base our relationships on reason, freedom, tolerance, and human dignity? Or do we want to root them in illogic, control, conformity, and group identity? Today, we are leaning too far toward the latter response, which is why I consider the “new age” we are now in to be another Dark Age, an Age of Endarkenment. Human civilization cannot begin to advance again until this darkness is negated by that grand and age-old light, our light, the light of liberalism and its commitment to reason, freedom, tolerance, and human dignity. I believe that day is coming, sooner than later, and when it does, humanity will look back with gratitude for those of us courageous enough to keep this light aglow.

<sup>1</sup> Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, Henry Holt & Company, Inc., New York, NY, 1947, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>3</sup> Pinker, Steven. *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (p. 373). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>5</sup> Robertson, Richie, *The Enlightenment*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY, 2021, p. 777f.

<sup>6</sup> Hicks, Stephen R.C., *Explaining Postmodernism*, Ockham’s Razor Publishing, 2004, 2018, p. 99.

<sup>7</sup> Russell, Bertrand, *A History of Western Philosophy*, Touchstone, Simon & Schuster, New York, NY, 1945, p. 696.

<sup>8</sup> Hicks, *ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*