

Postmodern Approaches to Truth

Quotes of the Day:

“Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives.”

“Reason and power are one and the same.”

**-- philosopher, sociologist, and literary theorist
Jean-François Lyotard**

Premodern: 380-

Modern: 1600s-

Postmodern: 1960s-

premodern

faith

revelation

authority

custom

deference

tradition

obedience

modern

reason

evidence

science

data

freedom

progress

universal

postmodern

power

cynicism

subjectivity

relativism

language

narrative

discourse

Some influential thinkers within each approach

premodern

Augustine of Hippo

Thomas Aquinas

Martin Luther

John Calvin

modern

Voltaire

John Stuart Mill

Albert Einstein

George Orwell

postmodern

Michel Foucault

Jacques Derrida

Judith Butler

Stanley Fish

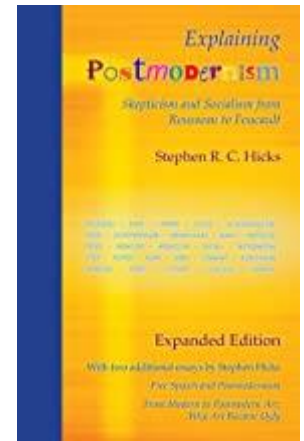
- **premodern: truth comes from God and is confirmed and communicated by authorities**
- **modern: truth is that which can be established through reason and evidence**
- **postmodern: there are no universal truths, for truth is always local and relative**

Does the postmodern claim about truth seem contradictory?

Readings for next class

Why did postmodernism arise in the 1960s?

Philosopher Stephen Hicks's explanation.



- **Long philosophical tradition dating back to Immanuel Kant that led to radical skepticism about knowledge claims.**
- **The early postmodernists were Marxists. By the 1960s, it was apparent that Marxism (as implemented) had failed in every respect. Postmodernism was a way of denying that reality.**

Some key postmodern ideas, with the caveats that it's hard to summarize such a large body of work, and postmodernists can be hard to pin down:

- Truth is always relative to a perspective. Can't say one perspective is right and another is wrong. No metanarratives.**
- Science is just another way of knowing, no better or worse than any other.**
- Reason and evidence are covers for the interests of a person, group, or institution.**
- Facts are created, not discovered. All facts are theory-laden.**

- To postmodernists, the central concept is power, not truth.
- Every knowledge claim is simultaneously a power grab.
- Controlling language is a means of power. Free speech is an illusion; it does not exist and cannot exist.
- Like modernists, postmodernists challenge authority. Postmodernists differ in viewing authority or power as suffused throughout all of society (“the panopticon”).



- **We can only understand the world through language, which is self-referential. We can't access an underlying reality.**
- **Language is ambiguous and unstable. Slippage between the speaker or writer's intent, and what is said.**
- **Further slippage in language between the communication at hand and how the listener or reader interprets it. The result is an infinite number of interpretations, none of which is "True".**



Social construction: something that exists through contingent social means, because we agree that it exists, as opposed to being natural. Money as an example.

Other examples: borders, ethnicities

- **Postmodernism: Everything about the world is socially constructed (justice, love, gender, truth, scientific concepts and theories, etc.)**
- **Words and discourses create the world. There is no outside-text.**

- **There is no such thing as progress, because it would require objective standards. Postmodernists say there are no objective standards.**
- **Whereas modernists have sought universal knowledge, rights, morality, etc., postmodernists reject anything universal and stress the subjective, local, and particular.**
- **Postmodernism encourages a group-centered view of the world. Since power is relational, society is always group vs. group. Each individual is subsumed within and defined by their groups.**

Much of postmodern thinking revolves around how to understand and interpret words and texts, through means different from a modern approach.

George Orwell, 1984



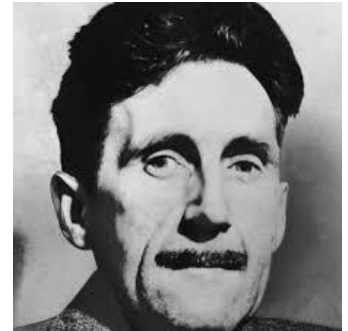
The slogans of the Ministry of Truth in 1984, written on the side of its building:

War is Peace

Freedom is Slavery

Ignorance is Strength

George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language”

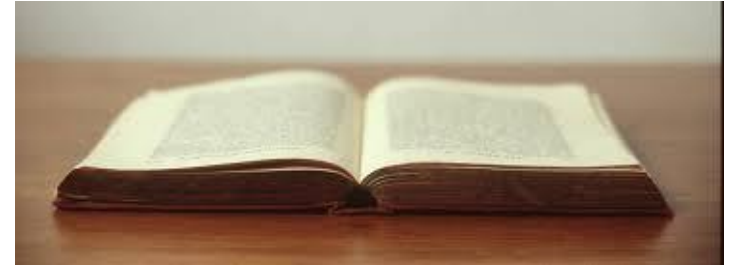


<https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/politics-and-the-english-language/>

“Each of these passages has faults of its own, but, quite apart from avoidable ugliness, two qualities are common to all of them. The first is staleness of imagery; the other is lack of precision. The writer either has a meaning and cannot express it, or he inadvertently says something else, or he is almost indifferent as to whether his words mean anything or not.”

“A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus: What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect? And he will probably ask himself two more: Could I put it more shortly? Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?”

Postmodernists take a different approach to words and texts, as illustrated in Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”



<https://writing.upenn.edu/~taransky/Barthes.pdf>

“the Author is supposed to feed the book — that is, he pre-exists it, thinks, suffers, lives for it; he maintains with his work the same relation of antecedence a father maintains with his child. Quite the contrary, the modern writer (scriptor) is born simultaneously with his text”

“a text does not consist of a line of words, releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God)”

“the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture”

“Once the Author is gone, the claim to ‘decipher’ a text becomes quite useless. To give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing.”

“refusing to assign to the text (and to the world as text) a ‘secret’: that is, an ultimate meaning, liberates an activity which we might call counter-theological, properly revolutionary”

“the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination”

“the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author”