

# Why Postmodernism Is Incompatible with a Politics of Liberty

by Michael Rectenwald



Several months ago, I debated Thaddeus Russell on [The Tom Woods Show](#). The proposition debated was “Postmodern philosophy is compatible with a politics of individual liberty.” Thaddeus defended the proposition and I opposed it. Here, I want to flesh out some of the points I made in the debate, adding more context than I could marshal under the constraints of the format. For better or worse, this requires a somewhat deep dive into postmodern ideas.

Postmodernism, I argue, is incompatible with liberty, first because it sees the individual as a mere product, as constructed by language, social factors, and so on. As such, postmodernism effectively denies self-determination and individual agency. Second, the cultural obsession with social identity that is current today derives from the social

constructivism of postmodern philosophy. Such social constructivism further denies individual agency. The very concept of truth, meanwhile, is denied in favor of subjective belief. For reasons discussed below, the denial of the concept of truth is anathema to liberty.

Thaddeus Russell takes postmodernism's "anything goes" epistemological subjectivism, skepticism, and idealism for epistemic "humility." That is, because postmodernism eschews or denies "truth" and suggests that there are merely different "narratives" that pass for truth, it allows for people to escape from the truth claims that others, like the state, would impose on them. Its rejection of metanarratives is liberational and Russell takes this as an invocation of freedom.

But this is a mistake. As I argued in [Springtime for Snowflakes](#):

*Once beliefs are unconstrained by the object world ... the possibility for assuming a pretense of infallibility becomes almost irresistible, especially when the requisite power is available to support such beliefs. In fact, given its willy-nilly determination of truth and reality on the basis of beliefs alone, philosophical and social idealism necessarily becomes dogmatic, authoritarian, anti-rational, and effectively religious.*

I mean that when coupled with the premium that Michel Foucault, Jean François Lyotard, and others place on power, when everything is a power struggle, the lack of objective constraints, the lack of belief in "truth," or any criteria for the judgment of facts, opens us up to the arbitrary imposition of beliefs—to authoritarianism. When "my truth" becomes as good or better than any objective truth, or any attempts to approach truth, when "lived experience" trumps facts, then, when one has the requisite power, one can impose

one's truth claims with apparent impunity. There is nothing to push back against belief. When objective criteria are eliminated, there is no court of appeal—other than authority. The ideal of objectivity, always asymptotically approached, should be the court of appeal, but it is thrown out in advance by postmodernism. So, postmodernism resembles nothing more than it does the religious creeds that Russell apparently deplores.

We see this playing in the social justice movement. And, contrary to what Russell maintains—that social justice has nothing to do with postmodernism—social justice ideology adopts the postmodern epistemology, and this adoption has consequences. Take transgenderism for example. When belief is unmoored from observation, and when such unmoored belief is institutionalized as it is today, it leads to the abolition of others' rights, including the right to make statements about observable facts. One is compelled to acknowledge the self-described genders of believers and to use their self-assigned pronouns, or else. If one denies the self-declared gender of one's child, one may lose custody, or may even be thrown in jail. Similarly, critical race theory, which derives its epistemology from postmodernism, posits "lived experience" above all other criteria. Statistics, historical evidence, etc., are of no importance. "Stories" become the only valid evidence, and such stories are unfalsifiable. When coupled with state and institutional power, such unmoored belief becomes dictatorial. Believe my lived experience, or else. You must take me at my word. You must accept my unfalsifiable stories.

In *Explaining Postmodernism*, Stephen Hicks has a related but different explanation. He suggests that the postmodern epistemology is a cover for the authoritarianism of postmodernism. With its extreme epistemological subjectivism and skepticism, the postmodern epistemology allows postmodernists to deny socialism's historical failures, while

maintaining its ethos and goals. As Hicks puts it, "Postmodernism is the academic far Left's epistemological strategy for responding to the crisis caused by the failures of socialism in theory and in practice." This would account for the authoritarianism of such postmodernists as the literary critic Stanley Fish, who in his most recent book, *The First*, argues for the curtailment of First Amendment rights, including the elimination of religious expression in the public square and the elimination of speech that others find offensive or harmful. If given power, Fish would no doubt impose such sanctions. Thus, Camille Paglia is right in calling Fish a "totalitarian Tinkerbell." While Hicks's argument has merit, it doesn't explain the connection between the authoritarianism and the epistemology, except as an incidental relationship.

My explanation, as I have said, is that epistemological subjectivism, idealism, and relativism are intrinsically connected to authoritarianism. Take the case of Lysenkoism in the Soviet Union, for example. Despite the claim that Marxism is materialist and objective, Lysenkoism was an example of philosophical idealism wielded by the state. The neo-Lamarckian creed became state policy and led to widespread famine and the death of millions, as well as one of the worst witch hunts in the history of science. Lysenkoism underscores the danger of denying our best science. There was a better biological science at the time—Mendelian genetics coupled with the Darwinian model of natural selection. Agreement with this better science could have saved millions of lives. The authoritarianism of unmoored belief led to famine and persecution.

In the debate, Russell suggested that I was antilibertarian because I referred to "objective constraints on discourse." But I did not refer to "objective constraints on discourse." I referred to objective constraints, period. I didn't thereby suggest that states could impose constraints on discourse with

impunity. I meant that the material world imposes constraints on us. We deny these constraints at our own peril.

My second main point concerned Russell's crediting postmodernism with the gains of liberation movements like feminism, civil rights, etc. "Postmodernism allows people to escape the social constructs that contain them," Thaddeus's story goes. But feminism, for one, doesn't need postmodernism, and it never did. Further, it would be much better off without it.

Feminism preceded postmodernism by decades, if not centuries. Mary Wollstonecraft, for example, argued effectively for the expansion of women's rights in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792. And Wollstonecraft wrote very much in the Enlightenment, modernist tradition, extending Enlightenment ideals and ideas to the case of women. The suffragette movement preceded postmodernism by decades. The best feminism, like the best movements for civil rights, have involved the extension of Enlightenment ideas and ideals. So, feminism did not need postmodernism, and neither did civil rights.

In fact, postmodernism has done nothing for feminism, except to befuddle feminists with notions of social constructivism and psychoanalytic theory—self-constructed boxes they've been trying to fight their way out of ever since. For feminists, the social construction of gender does not mean that gender can be wished away. Instead, escaping it is a never-ending struggle—to undo the supposed effects of "patriarchy," or the phallus, in the case of the psychoanalytic feminists who followed Jacques Lacan.

Yet even gender constructivism preceded postmodern theory. In the psychological literature, the word "gender" was first applied to human sex difference in 1955, when the "sexologist" John Money introduced the phrase "gender roles." From there it became not only gender roles that were constructed but also gender itself. Later, sex difference was deemed to be socially

constructed as well. This is why I have called John Money's intervention "the gender jackpot." Ever since Money, gender has multiplied and sought ever-new pronouns, an absurd development that institutions have ludicrously attempted to keep pace with. The ironic result of gender constructivism is that feminism is now being run by people with penises. If gender is a social construct, then anyone can adopt the gender of their choice. Thus, males can be women. But that isn't even what feminists meant by the idea. They saw gender constructs as obdurate social categories that had been established by long-standing conventions and enforced in multiple, almost inscrutable ways. For these feminists, gender was no less real for being socially constructed. Undermining gender involved a long, arduous social struggle. And gender-critical feminists figured sex and gender as tightly coupled. The attack of second-wave feminists was not against biology but against socialization and social constraints based on biology. They did not suggest that sex itself was socially constructed, only that roles based on sex were socially constructed. Postmodernism, in third-wave feminism, suggests that sex itself is a social construct. While our ideas about it surely are socially constructed, sex difference exists no matter what we think about it.

Gender difference and sex difference are very different things. Yes, sex roles, or gender roles, have changed across time, but, to the best of our knowledge, sex difference itself has not, at least not appreciably. And thank goodness for that—unless you believe, with some postmodern environmentalists, that human reproduction is "evil."

Furthermore, that postmodernists, according to Russell, don't believe in biological determinism doesn't make biology any less determining. We are more or less biologically determined. I'll say more about this below. But I believe that the introduction of the concept of "gender constructivism" to describe human beings has been pernicious, causing confusion

and doing immeasurable harm to feminism and Western culture at large.

Meanwhile, the idea that gender is a social construct—determined by social factors—can be as deterministic as biological determinism. This is especially the case in the hands of postmodern theory. That's because, under postmodern theory, the notion of the autonomous, preexisting self itself is denied. The self becomes nothing but a mere aftereffect, a product of language and/or other social factors. Under postmodernism, the self is "decentered," that is, removed from the center of history and importance. And the agency of the self is virtually denied. We can read this in the writing of the poststructuralists Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, for example, in "The Death of the Author" and "What Is an Author?," respectively. Here, we find that authors do not create texts. Texts produce their authors! Authors, and, by extension, the human subject itself, is the mere product of text. Or, as described by Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), the self is a mere "node" in a communications circuit. Lyotard made his demotion of the self quite explicit: "And each of us knows that our self does not amount to much... A self does not amount to much." This is hardly a formula for self-determination, which requires individual agency, agency that postmodernism denies human beings.

Libertarianism requires the individual (the first form of property) and postmodernism denies the individual. To the extent that Russell values the individual, I argued, he's not a postmodernist. To the extent that he buys into postmodernism's denial of the self-determining individual agent, he's not a libertarian.

Furthermore, postmodernism's constant emphasis on social constructs suggests that they are all-determining. This accounts for the social justice obsession with social identity categories and its denial of individual identity and agency.

Every outcome is determined by gender, race, or what have you. Everyone is reduced to their social identity category. This obsession has led to the rabid identity politics of such groups as Black Lives Matter, who see race as the sole determining factor for everything that happens to persons of color. Such determinism denies their individual agency, reducing them to mere objects of history.

Meanwhile, there are different kinds of social constructivism. My epistemology may be called, following David Hess, a "moderate constructivism." Hess advanced the term in his *An Advanced Introduction to Science Studies* (1997) to refer to a position that regards science as representing its natural object(s) *and* the social and political orders, rather than either one exclusively. Martin J.S. Rudwick developed a similar standpoint based on his detailed and remarkable study of the Devonian controversy in geology. Rudwick suggested that "a consensual product of scientific debate can be regarded as both artifactual and natural, as a thoroughly social construction that may nonetheless be a reliable representation of the natural world." The point is that there is a difference between the social construction of knowledge and the utter incommensurability of knowledge and the object world. The latter implies that scientific knowledge is constructed, willy-nilly, and even that the object world itself is socially constructed. Thaddeus Russell, like postmodern science studies critics, confuses the two. The latter leads to an epistemological nihilism, because no one's construction is any better than anyone else's.

Take *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts* (1979) by Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, for example. *Laboratory Life* is an anthropological examination of a scientific laboratory as a strange but not altogether exotic culture. Almost "going native," but not quite, the assumed strangeness effect allowed Latour and Woolgar to see science's final product in terms of what they called "literary



inscription," or writing. Despite Latour's subsequent break with the implications of "the social construction of scientific facts" arrived at in *Laboratory Life*, this first book is constructivist through and through. The anthropologists aimed to show that "the construction of scientific facts, in particular, is a process of generating texts whose fate (status, value, utility, facticity) depends on their subsequent interpretation." Latour and Woolgar thus reduced the objects of scientific knowledge to "text," just as Jacques Derrida had done with ontologies in philosophy. Of course, a fallacy was at work. Latour and Woolgar's sleight of hand demonstrated that scientific facts exist only within texts—"there is no outside of text," to quote Derrida. But as with all magic tricks, the deception had taken place earlier, before we were looking. Latour and Woolgar stealthily conflated the knowledge of scientific facts—established in the process of science and expressed in language—and the reality referred to by that knowledge. Confusing knowledge and the objects of knowledge, our postmodern magicians seemed to make the material world itself disappear into the text. The error is known as the fallacy of reification—or treating an abstraction, like the knowledge of an object, as equivalent to a concrete object or thing, like the object to which the knowledge refers. Russell makes the same mistake.

In *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida wrote that "[t]here is nothing outside of text." So, some postmodernists do in fact deny objective reality, contrary to Russell's claim. Derrida's *Of Grammatology* is a philosophical excursus into the philosophy of language. It draws on Ferdinand de Saussure's notion of the sign—the signifier-signified-referent construction—to undermine any relationship between language and the object world. The sign is the word, which has no necessary relationship to what it refers to. The signifier points to a signified, or an idea, not to the referent, or something in the object world. Derrida goes further than Saussure and breaks the connection between the signifier and the

signified, arguing for the self-referentiality of the signifier. The signifier points to itself and not to the signified. But Derrida also ends up conflating the signified and the referent and thereby denying any relationship of language to the object world. This makes him an epistemological nihilist. Knowledge becomes virtually impossible under such a sign system.

Language, however, is a tool. It allows us to connect particular words to particular objects, more or less accurately defined, thus enhancing their use and manipulation. To pretend otherwise is sheer nonsense. (The title *Of Grammatology* allows us to find Derrida's ideas in said book by that title.) The point here is that by denying a relationship between language and the object world, postmodernism abandons truth claims, as does Russell himself. This epistemological nihilism would not be a problem if not for its likely consequences.

In "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," Alan Sokal argued, parodically, that gravity itself is a social construct. The postmodernists at *Social Text* fell for the parody. The Sokal Hoax pointed to the absurdity of the postmodern position inaugurated by Derrida as applied to science.

Take the denial of biological determinism that Russell vaunts as a credit to postmodernism. Forget about identity categories for a moment. We are more or less biologically determined and ignoring the extent of our biological determination can be dangerous. The key is to find out just how biologically determined we are, and in what ways. To investigate the extent and ways by which we are biologically determined is not necessarily to cede authority to the state, as Russell suggested in the debate. Rather, it allows us to approach an understanding of the scope of freedom itself. Liberty, if it is to be meaningful, depends on the acknowledgement of constraints—those imposed by the object world, and those

imposed by other people's rights. Without such an acknowledgement, liberty loses all meaning. We wouldn't know what we are at liberty to do.

Finally, as discussed above, the lack of an objective court of appeal leads to the possibility that others may impose their unmoored beliefs on us, given the requisite power to do so. "Pseudo-realities," as James Lindsay notes in a [recent installment](#) of *New Discourses*, "being false and unreal, will always generate tragedy and evil on a scale that is at least proportional to the reach of their grip on power ... "

Totalitarianism depends on the enforcement of false beliefs. Postmodernism admittedly and purposively leaves us no way to adjudicate beliefs. Likewise, postmodernism lends itself to totalitarianism.

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