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**Article Title:** David N. Gibbs; 'Is There  
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**Volume:**

**Issue:**

**Month/Year:** 2000

**Pages:** 11-28 + Book title page

**Paged by** \_\_\_\_ (Initials)

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# Is There Room for the Real World in the Postmodernist Universe?



A MAJOR THEME of this article is the unoriginality of postmodern thought,<sup>1</sup> and we will begin by noting the unoriginality of postmodern thought with regard to the question of language. It is a familiar postmodern observation that language helps to construct our thoughts and, at least in a certain sense, our realities. It is interesting to note that the issue of language and its capacity to distort perception was a central concern of George Orwell, who emphasized the salience of language in ways that anticipate postmodern writing. Perhaps Orwell's most memorable analysis can be found in his 1946 essay, "Politics and the English Language," in which he made the following observations: "Now, it is clear that the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes . . . But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely. A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks." Evidently, the notion that subject and object can be mutually constituting and that language constructs reality to some extent is not particularly new.<sup>2</sup>

Orwell went on and noted how the use of phrases, clichés, and jargon

*Editor's note:* David N. Gibbs is Associate Professor of Political Science, at the University of Arizona. "Is There Room for the Real World in the Postmodernist Universe?" takes aim at the potential of jargon to obfuscate. The author is particularly concerned about the involuted jargon of postmodern scholars, and his essay constitutes a full-blown attack on what he terms the epistemological relativism of the postmodernist position. For Gibbs, the postmodernists are destined by their own internal logic to fall to the Scylla of extreme relativism—what he terms the "Timothy McVeigh paradox"—or the Charybdis of unoriginality.

words not only serve to confuse substantive issues but, more actively, to dull mental activity:

When one watches some tired hack on the platform mechanically repeating the familiar phrases—*bestial atrocities, iron heel, bloodstained tyranny, free peoples of the world, stand shoulder to shoulder*—one often has a curious feeling that one is not watching a live human being but some kind of dummy: a feeling which suddenly becomes stronger at moments when the light catches the speaker's spectacles and turns them into blank disks which seem to have no eyes behind them. And this is not altogether fanciful. A speaker who uses that kind of phraseology has gone some distance towards turning himself into a machine. The appropriate noises are coming out of his larynx, but his brain is not involved as it would be if he were choosing the words for himself.<sup>3</sup>

Orwell was, of course, writing in a different era and political context, referring to the type of language that one found in political parties at the time, but it is easy to see that his points could be generalized. Anyone familiar with recent academic milieux, especially in the social sciences and humanities, can readily appreciate the widespread use of technical jargon and its potential to obfuscate. One may wonder what would happen if the papers presented at academic conferences were "unpacked": If the ideas were translated into plain English, what would they look like? Would the ideas contain any real content, once stripped of their verbiage, or would they seem devoid of meaning?

Once in a while, someone manages to cut through the morass of words and expose the underlying issues at stake. Such an event occurred in 1996, when Alan Sokal, a mathematical physicist, raised the issue of meaning in postmodernism through rather unorthodox means. He drafted a postmodernist interpretation of quantum physics that was actually a parody, one that contained numerous (and intentional) errors of fact or interpretation. The parodic article was then submitted to the journal *Social Text*<sup>4</sup> for a special issue on cultural critiques of science, in order to determine whether the journal editors could recognize the article's flaws. The article was in fact accepted by the editors, who evidently failed to detect the joke, and it was published as a serious article. Sokal later revealed that the whole matter was a hoax and that the article's acceptance demonstrated (in his view) the intellectual bankruptcy of cultural critiques of science and of postmodern thought more generally. The whole affair generated an impressive amount of press coverage in the United States, Britain, and (most recently) France, producing one of those rare cases of an academic controversy that achieves wide recognition in the popular press.

The purpose of this essay is to explore the significance of Sokal's prank and in particular to examine the validity of one of Sokal's main points:

that postmodernism is a form of epistemological relativism that denies any possibility of truth or knowledge. The relativism issue formed a central part of the controversy surrounding the Sokal hoax, and of all the points raised in the *Social Text* article, it was the following that gained the most attention:

Many scientists, especially physicists . . . still cling to the dogma imposed by the long post-Enlightenment hegemony over the Western intellectual outlook, which can be summarized briefly as follows: that there exists an external world, whose properties are independent of any individual human being and indeed of humanity as a whole; that these properties are encoded in "eternal" physical laws; and that human beings can obtain reliable, albeit imperfect and tentative, knowledge of these laws by hewing to the "objective" procedures and epistemological strictures prescribed by the (so-called) scientific method. . . . It has thus become increasingly apparent that *physical "reality," no less than social "reality," is at bottom a social and linguistic construct.*<sup>5</sup>

The implication of the above paragraph is perfectly clear: What is considered to be "reality" (note the quotation marks) exists in people's minds but has no objective existence. Accordingly, the widespread *belief* that there is a real external world—one that exists independently of people's imaginations and is governed by physical laws that operate irrespective of social or cultural conditions—is a myth.

Now it is important to bear in mind that Sokal wrote the above as a parody. Nevertheless, Sokal has argued that these statements accurately reflect the core of postmodernist thought; the willingness of the *Social Text* editors to publish an article containing such statements, without serious argumentation, demonstrates that such views are widely accepted. Sokal expresses incredulity at the postmodernists' acceptance of relativism, noting that "[t]here is a world; its properties are *not* merely social constructions; facts and evidence *do* matter. What sane person would contend otherwise?"<sup>6</sup>

Numerous writers, including Stanley Fish, Stanley Aronowitz, and Sandra Harding, have all argued that Sokal's claims represent a straw man argument, one that resembles postmodern epistemology only as a caricature.<sup>7</sup> With regard to Sokal's specific claim that postmodernism accepts epistemic relativism and casts doubt on the existence of physical reality, Fish responds forcefully. He writes of "the improbability of the scenario [Sokal] conjures up: Scholars with impeccable credentials making [relativist] statements no sane person could credit. The truth is that none of his targets would ever make such statements."<sup>8</sup> To be sure, the relativism charge is an old one and has been raised many times before the Sokal controversy (although never so dramatically). When the issue of relativism has been raised in a polemical context, defenders of postmodernism have

always denied the charge. In 1982, for example, Richard Rorty commented: "‘Relativism’ is the view that every belief on a certain topic, or perhaps on *any* topic is as good as every other. No one holds this view. Except for the occasional cooperative freshman, one cannot find anybody who says that two incompatible opinions on an important topic are equally good. The philosophers who get *called* ‘relativists’ are those who say that the grounds for choosing between such opinions are less algorithmic than had been thought. . . . If there *were* any relativists then they would, of course, be easy to refute."<sup>9</sup>

In what follows, I will argue that postmodernism is at base characterized by an ambiguous epistemological stance: On the one hand, postmodernists often do argue positions that are clearly relativist in nature, claims to the contrary notwithstanding, and affirm that on any specific question there exist multiple truths; that there is no consistent, reasonable basis to accept or reject any one of these truths; that, above all, knowledge is *purely* the product of the unique social conditions, interests, whims, and linguistic practices of the individuals or groups that purport to generate knowledge. "Reality" (even if it is said to exist) cannot play any significant role in the construction of socially and linguistically mediated truths. On the other hand, postmodernists adopt a much more moderate position, which (in contrast to pure relativism) may be characterized as follows: Interpretations of social or physical circumstances are *partly* the product of the social conditions, interests, whims, and linguistic practices of the individuals or groups. In this latter formulation, our understanding of reality is influenced by social and linguistic distortions *and* by the existence of real social and physical circumstances. This latter perspective, which we will term the social construction approach, argues that objective analysis is problematic and difficult to achieve, given the extrascientific factors that distort perception; but the possibility of objective knowledge remains potentially achievable, at least in some circumstances.

We thus have two distinct and mutually exclusive approaches to epistemology, the relativist approach and the social construction approach. Postmodernism, it will be argued, reflects a basic ambiguity and an unwillingness to clearly select between these two approaches. This ambiguity constitutes the core of postmodernist approaches to knowledge.

### *Postmodernism and Relativism*

Before I discuss at length the ambiguous features of postmodernism, I will argue that there certainly is quite a bit of straightforward relativism

in at least certain variants of postmodernist thought. Rorty's contention that "no one" affirms a belief in relativism is inconsistent with a sizable body of literature. It is easy to come up with examples from the works of some of the most distinguished figures. Let us consider the analysis of Jacques Derrida, where he purports to deconstruct the autobiographical writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau:

*There is nothing outside of the text* [emphasis in original]. And that is neither because Jean-Jacques' [Rousseau's] life, or the existence of Mamma or Thérèse . . . is not of prime interest to us, nor because we have access to their so-called "real" existence only in the text and we have neither any means of altering this, nor any right to neglect this limitation . . . in what one calls the real life of these existences "of flesh and bone" beyond and behind what one believes can be circumscribed as Rousseau's text there has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations, which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the "real" supervening and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc. And *thus to infinity*.<sup>10</sup>

Much of this certainly sounds relativistic in the extreme; none of the statements here admits any qualification whatsoever. Notice too how the word *real* appears twice in quotation marks. One is left with the overall impression that reality literally does not exist except as a figment of Rousseau's or the reader's imagination ("there is nothing outside of the text," "there has never been anything but writing"). With reality abandoned, the reader is free to undertake an infinite number of readings ("and thus to infinity"), all of which presumably are to be accorded equal weight. Nor is this the only instance in which Derrida presents "reality" in relativistic terms. In a later essay he writes: "there is no such thing as truth in itself. . . . Even if it should be for me, about me, truth is plural."<sup>11</sup> Note that he does not write that the ways that we *interpret* truth are plural but that truth itself is plural.

Let us pause for a moment to consider the significance of these facts. It may be argued that Derrida is just posing and does not literally mean what he is saying. Perhaps Derrida is arguing a much more moderate position, for example, that a combination of incomplete information, vagueness of language, and human fallibility often produce misinterpretations, and such misinterpretations are more common than is widely assumed to be the case. When he writes of "multiple truths," he does not mean this literally; he is suggesting that circumstances can sometimes lead different people to *interpret* truth in multiple ways. This is surely a much more reasonable—and more conventional—view than the idea that there are literally multiple truths.

So it may be that Derrida is simply exaggerating in order to make his point; this is a possibility that I will deal with later. For the moment, we

will stress that Derrida's statements do sound relativistic. And Derrida is not alone in proffering such views. Jean Baudrillard, to take another example, celebrates the idea of multiple realities in his witty book *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, which argues that there was such a high degree of propaganda issuing from official sources during the 1991 Persian Gulf War and such manipulative images from the mass media, that "reality" disappeared into a series of "hyper-events" that took place on television screens. Thus: "[w]e have gone in a week from 20 percent to 50 percent and then to 30 percent destruction of Iraqi military potential. The figure fluctuates exactly like the fortunes of the stock market. 'The land offensive is anticipated today, tomorrow, in a few hours, in any case sometime this week . . . the climatic conditions are ideal for a confrontation etc.' Whom to believe? *There is nothing to believe.*"<sup>12</sup> Relativistic language permeates the entire essay: "*Everything* is therefore transposed into the virtual"<sup>13</sup>—and presumably nothing is left that can still be called real. The very title of the book underscores the central theme: the relativity of truth. Of course, much of *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* is ironic humor; and yet, after reading the essay, one is left with the impression that Baudrillard is at base quite serious. Expressions of relativism are not confined to this one essay. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard rather bluntly states, "I am a nihilist . . . I observe, I accept, I assume, I analyze the second revolution, that of the twentieth century, that of post-modernity, which is *the immense process of the destruction of meaning*, equal to the earlier destruction of appearances."<sup>14</sup>

More recent writings in the social sciences also manifest relativistic proclivities. Consider, for example, Murray Edelman's *Constructing the Political Spectacle*. Edelman analyzes how political images are constructed by the mass media and generate information that serves the interests of powerful social groups or individuals. Accordingly, public discussions of what is and what is not to be considered a social "problem" worthy of attention; which foreign countries are to be considered as external "enemies" and which are not; or the role that political "leadership" can play in resolving the identified problems or confronting the purported enemies are all highly subjective matters requiring definition. The ways that such matters are defined in the mass media are essentially arbitrary in quality. Edelman displays considerable insight and depth in his analysis of such constructions. However, he refuses to render any definitive judgment about whether these seemingly manipulative constructions are true or false according to some standard of objectivity. Even the most outrageous or propagandistic media images that he describes do not, in his view, represent falsehood or distortion; they represent instead some of the many ways that "truth" can be defined. Edelman adopts an

explicit and unmitigated relativism, in which reality is irrelevant to the construction of reality and no interpretation can be accorded greater weight than any other interpretation. Edelman is perfectly frank about the resulting relativism, and he defends the relativist position against possible criticisms, noting, for example, that "relativist positions are not uniquely vulnerable with respect to verification or falsification."<sup>15</sup> Since Edelman has largely given up any possibility of understanding the world according to objective standards, he also acknowledges the meager possibilities of seeking to change it through any form of political action: "Direct political action through voting and lobbying can help bring modest and temporary changes, but are more effective as psychological balm for those who engage in them than as agencies of lasting and significant change."<sup>16</sup> Epistemic relativism thus resolves into political and social nihilism.

It is easy to come up with many similar examples. Peter Novick has written a lengthy (and fascinating) history of the historical profession, emphasizing how objectivity has been little more than a "noble dream" among historians. Novick qualifies this point and disavows relativism, agreeing with Rorty that no serious observer really believes in the relativist position and that charges of relativism are invariably off base; then he contradicts himself and writes of literary critic Roland Barthes as follows: "By the time of his *S/Z* (1970) he saw the 'text' as without *any* determinate meaning or boundaries, *irreducibly* plural, an *endless* play of signifiers."<sup>17</sup> If ideas can be "irreducibly plural" and can constitute an "endless play of signifiers," then what we are left with—whether Novick likes it or not—is relativism. Similarly, Fredric Jameson, in his classic essay, writes of "a society of the image of the simulacrum" in which there is "a transformation of the 'real' [in quotation marks once again] into so many pseudo-events."<sup>18</sup> At another point, Jameson proceeds to analyze E. L. Doctorow's novel *Ragtime* by noting: "This historical novel [*Ragtime*] can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can *only* 'represent' our ideas and stereotypes about that past."<sup>19</sup> Once again, we note the lack of qualification. Jameson does not argue that our understanding of the past through reading *Ragtime* is achieved *partly* on the basis of preconceived ideas or stereotypes; instead, he goes much further and argues that the *only* basis of understanding the past through this novel is preconceived ideas and stereotypes. In yet another postmodern classic, Jean-François Lyotard writes: "All we can do is gaze in wonderment at the diversity of discursive species, just as we do at the diversity of plant or animal species," and presumably there is no epistemological basis for resolving this diversity by determining which discourses are the more accurate or the more truthful, according to some standard. If any

such standard for discriminating among ideas does exist (or could exist), Lyotard makes no mention of it. Lyotard further concludes that "lamenting the 'loss of meaning' in postmodernity boils down to mourning the fact that knowledge is no longer principally narrative."<sup>20</sup> If Lyotard is troubled by this loss of meaning or if he sees any way out of the meaningless state that purportedly characterizes postmodernity, he once again makes no mention. I must confess that I was simply not able to comprehend very much of Michel Foucault's writings and therefore am unable to comment on them directly.<sup>21</sup> However, a sympathetic interpreter writes that, according to Foucault, "history is *entirely* contingent. Things just happen. Intellectuals impose interpretations upon these happenings, but they are artificial."<sup>22</sup> An article by Richard Ashley and R. B. J. Walker, which helped introduce postmodernism into the mainstream of international relations theory, is replete with relativist statements, which are offered repetitiously and with little or no qualification: "*The very possibility of truth is put in doubt*. Every representation appears not as a copy or recovery of something really present in some other time or place but as a representation of other representations—*none* original, each *equally* arbitrary, and *none* able to exclude other representations."<sup>23</sup>

It is worth noting that relativism seems perfectly compatible with certain core features of postmodern thought. Terry Eagleton defines postmodernism as "a style of thought that is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity, and objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives, or ultimate grounds of explanation."<sup>24</sup> It is only a small step to move from a suspicion of universals to outright rejection, all dismissed in the overall quest to deconstruct the grand narratives of modernity. In addition, postmodern epistemology is highly critical of positivist methodologies that purport to test various theories against evidence; alternative methodologies offered to test theories—when they are offered at all—tend to be extremely vague.<sup>25</sup> Again, such a standpoint is not synonymous with relativism, but it surely makes relativism easier to introduce.

The relativistic world described above is a disturbing one, for it does away altogether with the traditional distinction between scholarship and propaganda; any possibility of exposing error or falsehood must be abandoned as untenable, since analyses of propaganda would contain no greater "truth" value than the propaganda they purport to analyze. Even the most bizarre and ludicrous ideas—the political views of Timothy McVeigh or Lyndon LaRouche, for example—would merit equal consideration and respect with those of John Rawls or Jean Bethke Elshtain. Some may find this example overly polemical, but I do not think so. If one does away with all standards for evaluating the validity of ideas and

establishes, moreover, that efforts to “marginalize” certain ideas are wrong, then on what basis should we marginalize McVeigh or LaRouche in scholarly discussion? On what basis should we “privilege” the views of Rawls or Elshtain? The “Timothy McVeigh problem,” as I will term it, seems an intractable one for postmodernist versions of relativism (or any other kind of relativism). The problem is a long-standing and well recognized one, and it informed much of Orwell’s writing on propaganda. Reflecting on the Spanish civil war, Orwell made the following observations: “I am willing to believe that history is for the most part inaccurate and biased but what is peculiar of our own age is the abandonment of the idea that history *could* be truthfully written. In the past people deliberately lied or they unconsciously colored what they wrote or they struggled after the truth, well knowing that they must make many mistakes; but in each case they believed that ‘the facts’ existed and were more or less discoverable.”<sup>26</sup> The relativist ideas expressed by Derrida et al. would preclude any possibility that the facts even in principle can be discovered.

On reflection, it is unsurprising that, when pressed, postmodernists steadfastly deny that they are relativists since the position is such an obviously weak one. The main drawback of relativism is that it is boring.<sup>27</sup> If all perspectives are equally valid, then why bother to advance one’s own perspective? If all facts are equally suspect, then why bother to gather facts? If any analysis that the researcher undertakes on these (already meaningless) facts can never be validated or falsified, even in the most preliminary sense, then why go through the trouble of analysis? And if social scientific theories, whether postmodern or otherwise, are based on facts and analyses that are and necessarily must be arbitrarily selected, what is the utility of theory? If all positions are equally flawed, then why debate? Relativism, if carried to its logical extreme, would end all research and scholarly activity, and it is very difficult to see how relativism could produce any other result.

### *Relativism Qualified*

Now I will consider another possibility, one that I alluded to previously: Perhaps the quotes above are simple exaggerations intended to make a point and to elicit the reader’s attention, a technique of calculated overstatement. Some readers, including a few who are generally critical of postmodernism, make precisely this point.<sup>28</sup> Pauline Rosenau, for example, writes of a category of “affirmative postmodernists,” who do not seek to do away altogether with the possibility of objective knowledge but who only seek to “problematize” the issue to some extent.<sup>29</sup> It may be

argued that the postmodernists are not really arguing for a complete relativism but rather for a social construction of knowledge—that what we call knowledge is socially and linguistically constructed *to some extent*; our understanding of the world results from a combination of rational and irrational factors. What constitutes “the facts” according to this perspective is potentially discoverable, but the process of establishing factual information is complicated by the predispositions, biases, uses of language, and social position of the observer.

All of the above quotes could at least potentially be reinterpreted as overstatements, employed in order to make the point that the process of knowledge acquisition is more complex than implied by traditional positivist methodologies. Let us now consider this possibility. Taken in its more moderate version, postmodernist accounts yield important insights, generally ignored by positivist approaches (or at least the more dogmatic versions of positivism). One such insight is the limitation of positivist methodology itself: Positivism emphasizes the central importance of empirical testing of theories in order to establish their truth or falsity and, hence, to enable scientific progress.<sup>30</sup> Postmodern analyses, in contrast, have demonstrated how *little* positivist approaches tell us about the real world of science. Consider Donald McCloskey’s analysis of the economics profession, which demonstrated that the rise and fall of theoretical fixations, such as Keynesianism or monetarism, cannot always be explained according to traditional scientific criteria:

The Keynesian insights were not formulated as statistical propositions until the early 1950s, fifteen years after the bulk of younger economists had become persuaded they were true. By the early 1960s the Keynesian notions of liquidity traps and accelerator models of investment, despite repeated failures in their statistical implementations, were taught to students of economics as matters of scientific routine. Modernist methodology would have stopped all this cold in 1936: Where was the evidence of an objective, controlled, and statistical kind?

Nor was the monetarist counterrevolution a success in fact for modernist methodology . . . it was not modernist certitudes [regarding experimental confirmation of theories] that won the day for the view that money mattered. It was crude experiments and big books, by their crudeness and bigness, not the modernist rituals performed in the professional journals.

The Kennedy tax cut for example, raised their Keynesians to the peak of prestige; the inflation of the 1970s brought them down again, leaving the monetarists as temporary kings of the castle.<sup>31</sup>

McCloskey does not argue that economic doctrine is altogether arbitrary and uninfluenced by empirical facts: The inability of Keynesian thought to account for the inflation of the 1970s was a major factor in bringing discredit on the underlying theory and leading to the fall from popularity of Keynesian theory more generally.<sup>32</sup> However, McCloskey also emphasizes

the nonscientific factors, ignored by positivism, that often do influence research. One could easily extend this analysis to the application of rational choice theory in political science, which has achieved immense popularity, despite the relative absence of empirical confirmation for its central predictions.<sup>33</sup> The main point is that positivistic methodologies may be fine and well in principle; however, they tell a very incomplete story of how social science progresses—or degenerates—in the real world, where research is influenced by political biases, social pressures, fads, and other nonscientific considerations.

At a more affirmative level, postmodernist approaches emphasize the way that social conditions and linguistic practices can influence both scholarly research and policy making. Much of the literature in this category furthers our understanding, without lapsing into the nihilistic mode discussed above. McCloskey, for example, has argued that the popularity of invisible hand analogies in economics cannot be separated from the ideological needs and social context of capitalism. Novick elucidated how the social context of the cold war influenced the course of American historiography and compromised its pretense of scientific objectivity.<sup>34</sup> The literature on “postcolonialism” underscores the salience of social construction with regard to conditions of colonialism and imperialism.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, postmodernist writers have placed great emphasis on the importance of language in shaping our understanding of political and social issues: Roxanne Doty has demonstrated the importance of racist language in U.S. counterinsurgency policies in the Philippines; Schneider and Ingram have shown how the language of “deserving” and “undeserving” groups has structured social policy; and Deborah Stone has elucidated how rhetorical presentation can affect public interpretations of political conflict across a broad range of issues.<sup>36</sup> And there is a vast literature, generally postmodern in orientation, that focuses on how gender influences knowledge.<sup>37</sup> Taken as a whole, this literature emphasizes that our understanding of reality must take into account the “standpoint” of the observer and consider the varied ways that individual circumstances, affected by varied social contexts, can slant the acquisition of knowledge.<sup>38</sup> Postmodern epistemology can be interpreted, in sum, as stating, that “[a]ll understanding, in art, the human sciences, and the natural sciences is understanding that is contextual and historical, rooted in tradition and prejudice.”<sup>39</sup>

### *Old Wine in New Bottles?*

The studies cited above have an important drawback: They tend to ignore the fact that the social construction of knowledge was a very well

established feature of social science long before the term *postmodern* was coined. It is difficult to understand what, if anything, is distinctively postmodernist or even new about this idea that social context can influence the acquisition of knowledge. Max Weber, generally considered an exponent of the "scientific" study of society, was well aware that research took place in a social context and that this context could and often did influence scholarly agendas. Weber wrote at length on the problem of ideological, political, and ethical biases among researchers, how these factors could influence the way that researchers selected questions for study, how biases could influence the empirical investigations that researchers undertook on these questions, and the serious impediments that the whole process posed for the objective social science that Weber favored. Weber readily understood that scientific considerations were not the only influences on research, and he warned against the potentially corrupting effect of external pressures: "The pseudo- 'ethically neutral' prophet who speaks for the dominant interests has, of course, better opportunities for ascent due to the influence which these have on the political powers that be. I regard all this as very undesirable."<sup>40</sup> The salience of social context in research is very much a part of Weberian methodology. Similarly, Karl Mannheim, writing during the 1920s, coined the term "the sociology of knowledge" as the study of how social context can influence the production of ideas, and how ideologies tend to be associated with and reflect the interests of specific groups.<sup>41</sup> And we have seen that George Orwell wrote at length about how language can affect human knowledge.

It was probably Karl Marx who first wrote at length on the social construction of knowledge, and he did so more than a century before Foucault rediscovered the concept. It is of course unfashionable to quote Marx at length at this late date, but no matter:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e. the class which is the ruling *material* force of society is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas.<sup>42</sup>

Weber, Mannheim, Orwell, and Marx are all generally classed as "modernists," yet they clearly recognized the epistemological significance of social context, as well as the problems posed to scientific social inquiry.<sup>43</sup> It is thus very difficult to see what postmodernism offers with regard to epistemology that is not present in these four modernist writers. True, the

above modernists viewed social context primarily in terms of social classes, political parties, or interest groups, whereas the postmodernists focus on gender, race, and sexual preference. The essential point, however—that social context influences the acquisition of knowledge—is not an insight that originated with postmodernism. Claims that postmodernism represents a sharp break with traditional epistemology or that it constitutes a “revolutionary approach to the study of society”<sup>44</sup> seem overwrought, to say the least.

### *Conclusion*

At this point, it is useful to return to the point on which we began this discussion, that is, the question of language. At the outset, I should note that any analysis of postmodernism is rendered problematic, given the very complex language that is used in the genre. This is of course a common objection to postmodernism, recently restated with considerable force by Noam Chomsky:

As for the “deconstruction” that is carried out . . . I can’t comment, because most of it seems to me gibberish . . . Since no one has succeeded in showing me what I’m missing, we’re left with [this] option: I’m just incapable of understanding. I’m certainly willing to grant that it may be true, though I’m afraid I’ll have to remain suspicious, for what seem good reasons. There are lots of things I don’t understand—say the latest debates over whether neutrinos have mass or the way that Fermat’s last theorem was (apparently) proven recently. But from 50 years in this game, I have learned two things: 1) I can ask friends who work in these areas to explain it to me at a level that I can understand, and they can do so, without particular difficulty; 2) if I’m interested, I can proceed to learn more so that I will come to understand it. Now Derrida, Lacan, Lyotard, Kristeva etc . . . write things that I also don’t understand, but (1) and (2) don’t hold: no one who says they do understand can explain it to me and I haven’t a clue as to how to proceed to overcome my failures. That leaves one of two possibilities: a) some new advance in intellectual life has been made, perhaps some sudden genetic mutation, which has created a form of “theory” that is beyond quantum theory, topology etc in depth and profundity, or b) . . . I won’t spell it out.<sup>45</sup>

This is unduly harsh in tone, but it does raise a simple question: Why is postmodern prose so difficult to understand? The fact that Chomsky, who has very extensive interdisciplinary interests and considerable accomplishments, cannot understand this literature must raise some doubts.

I will attempt to offer an explanation for this opacity of style: It reflects an intellectual dilemma faced by postmodernism, one that offers no reasonable prospect of resolution. Postmodernists are caught, in essence, between an untenable nihilism and an equally untenable lack of originality.

Once we remove the obscure verbiage, the technical language, the plays on words, the witticisms, and the other aspects of the packaging that gives postmodernism its distinctive quality, it is very difficult to see anything that is terribly new about the insights regarding the importance of socially constructed knowledge—*unless* one wishes to take them to the nihilistic extremes noted above. It is the tendency to take social construction to the point of absurdity that gives postmodernism its distinctiveness and generates ideas that clearly go beyond the modernist contributions of Weber, Mannheim, et al. If one wishes to argue that human perception of reality is the result of social context and *nothing but the result of social context*, so that the potential for objective analysis is lost completely—then postmodernism has a contribution (of sorts) to make. The problem with this “contribution” is that it renders meaningful research impossible. And if one wishes to moderate the idea and argue that human perception of reality is biased *to some extent* by social context, then we are back to the position advocated by the modernist classics.<sup>46</sup>

Postmodernism is thus faced with an unpleasant set of options: Either accept an absurd and nihilistic position or settle for a reasonable, moderate position that is unoriginal. Often, the result of this dilemma is a form of writing that can charitably be termed confusing. Opaque language enables the postmodernist to obscure the problem and avoid the task of resolving the ambiguity. Without any explicit effort to address this problem, we are left with a postmodernist universe that is caught between nihilism, on the one hand, and unoriginality on the other.

### Notes

1. The author thanks Larry George, who, despite fundamental disagreements with my argument, offered some very useful criticisms. I have benefited immensely from our discussions. The essay is the revised version of a paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, March 1998, Minneapolis.

2. The recent trend in “constructivist” interpretations, which have some affinities with postmodernism, emphasizes the mutual constitution of subject and object. In light of Orwell’s quote above, it is important to note that this is *not* a very original insight. For an overview of constructivism, see Jeffrey Checkel, “The Constructivist Turn in International Relations Theory,” *World Politics* 50, no. 2 (1998).

3. George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” in *A Collection of Essays by George Orwell* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954), pp. 163, 172.

4. Alan Sokal, “Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity,” *Social Text*, nos. 46/47 (1996), available at <[www.physics.nyu.edu/faculty/sokal](http://www.physics.nyu.edu/faculty/sokal)>.

5. Sokal, *Transgressing the Boundaries*, pp. 1, 2. Emphasis added.

6. See Alan Sokal, "A Physicist Experiments with Cultural Studies," *Lingua Franca*, May/June 1996. Available at Sokal website, see n. 4, above. Emphasis in original.

7. See Stanley Fish, "Professor Sokal's Bad Joke," *New York Times*, May 21, 1996; Stanley Aronowitz and Sandra Harding are quoted in Liz McMillen, "Scholars Who Study the Lab Say Their Work Has Been Distorted," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 28, 1996.

8. Fish, "Professor Sokal's Bad Joke."

9. Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism," in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 166-67.

10. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 158-59. Note that the first sentence was italicized in the original. The latter italicized phrases in the quotation were all my emphasis.

11. Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 103. Emphasis added.

12. Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 41. Emphasis added.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 27. Emphasis added.

14. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 160. Emphasis added.

15. Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 5.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

17. Peter Novick, *That "Noble Dream": The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 540, 543. Emphasis added.

18. Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review*, no. 146 (1984), p. 87.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 71. Emphasis added.

20. Jean François Lyotard, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 26.

21. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1972).

22. Donald J. Puchala, "The Pragmatics of International History," *Mershon International Studies Review* 39 (1995), p. 9n. Emphasis added.

23. Richard K. Ashley and R. B. J. Walker, "Reading Dissidence/Writing the Discipline: Crisis and the Question of Sovereignty in International Studies," *International Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1990), pp. 378-79. Emphasis added.

24. Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. vii.

25. This is true, for example, in a recent postmodernist analysis of the Spanish-American War, by Larry George. George begins by evaluating and then dismissing various economic explanations of the U.S. role in the war, stressing the inadequacy of the theories' positivist assumptions; George argues instead for an explanation that emphasizes the symbolic benefits that the war provided for the American political system and for President William McKinley in particular. The paper offers many sharp insights into the symbolic uses of war. However, I was unable to discern any comprehensible methodology that could be used to establish the validity of George's preferred explanation or its superiority over competing

explanations. See Larry George, "The M(other) of Postmodern Wars: William McKinley, the Spanish-American War, and the Pharmacotic Presidency" (paper presented at the meeting of the International Studies Association, Minneapolis, March 1998).

26. George Orwell, "Looking Back on the Spanish War," in *A Collection of Essays by George Orwell* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954), p. 204. Emphasis in original.

27. I do not deal here with the obvious point that the relativist position is self-contradictory: If one affirms relativism of thought, then the *antirelativist* position must be considered equally valid. For more on this point, see Paul Boghossian, "What the Sokal Hoax Ought to Teach Us," *Times Literary Supplement*, December 13, 1996.

28. This is even true of Christopher Norris, who is highly critical of postmodernism but nevertheless defends Derrida against charges that he is a relativist. See Christopher Norris, *Reclaiming Truth: Contribution to a Critique of Cultural Relativism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

29. Pauline Rosenau, *Postmodernism and the Social Sciences* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 82-84, 144-54.

30. For a classic statement on positivist methodology, see Carl G. Hempel, *Philosophy of Natural Science* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966). It is sometimes unclear whether Hempel is arguing that science *should* proceed according to positivist standards that he advocates or that science *does* in fact achieve these standards in most cases. Postmodernists score points by noting the limitations of positivist accounts, such as Hempel's, in explaining the history of science. At this level the postmodernist critique has considerable merit.

31. Donald N. McCloskey, *The Rhetoric of Economics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), pp. 17-18.

32. McCloskey may be faulted for failing to elucidate the specific social conditions that led to the rise and fall of Keynesianism. Others have argued that the popularity of Keynesian economics during the three decades following the Great Depression reflected the power of organized labor in the American political process, as well as support from certain segments of the business community. The subsequent decline in the fortunes of Keynesian thought correlates closely with the political decline of labor and a shift in priorities in elite business sectors. See Robert M. Collins, *The Business Response to Keynes, 1929-1964* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981); and Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers, *Right Turn: The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986).

The vagaries of Keynesian economics nicely illustrate the salience of social context in scholarly analysis, as well as Mannheim's sociology of knowledge.

33. This is the central argument of Donald P. Green and Ian Shapiro, *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory: A Critique of Applications in Political Science* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994). Note that there is nothing to indicate that Green and Shapiro would accept the postmodernist label; certain of their conclusions do lend support, however, to the postmodernist critique of positivism as a guide to understanding purportedly scientific disciplines.

34. McCloskey, *Rhetoric of Economics*, p. 82; Novick, *That "Noble Dream,"* chaps. 10-12.

35. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Spivak Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1996). For a useful critique of Spivak and the postcolonial literature

more generally, see Russell Jacoby, "Marginal Returns: The Trouble with Post-colonial Theory," *Lingua Franca*, September/October 1995.

36. Roxanne Doty, "Foreign Policy as Social Construction: A Post-Positivist Analysis of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy in the Philippines," *International Studies Quarterly* 37 (1993); Ann Schneider and Helen Ingram, "Social Construction of Target Populations: Implications for Politics and Policy," *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 2 (1993); and Deborah A. Stone, *Policy Paradox and Political Reason* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988). I should point out that many of the studies in this category, despite their merit, also tend to lapse into the same nihilism and obscurity that characterizes much of the other literature cited above.

37. See summary in Gregor McLennan, "Feminism, Epistemology, and Post-modernism: Reflections on Current Ambivalence," *Sociology* 29, no. 3 (1995). Regarding epistemological questions in the study of international relations, see the excellent study by V. Spike Peterson, "The Gender of Rhetoric, Reason, and Realism," in Francis A. Beer and Robert Hariman, eds., *Post-Realism: The Rhetorical Turn in International Relations* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1996).

38. Susan Hekman, *Gender and Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 133.

39. Hans-Georg Gadamer, paraphrased in Hekman, *Gender and Knowledge*, p. 14.

40. Max Weber, "The Meaning of 'Ethical Neutrality' in Sociology and Economics," in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (New York: Free Press, 1949), p. 9.

41. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1936). Even Anthony Downs, whose work epitomizes modernist social science, recognized at least some of the limitations to objectivity, due to the corrosive effects of ideological bias: "Ideologies are nearly always viewed partly as means to political power employed by social classes or other groups. . . . No *Weltanschauung* is accepted at face value, because it is seen as tainted with its espousers' desire to gain power." Evidently, Downs too was aware that knowledge is always influenced by social context, at least to some extent. Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957, pp. 96-97).

42. Karl Marx, "The German Ideology," in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1978), pp. 172-73. Emphasis in original.

43. A recent updating of the social construction perspective (without the inconsistencies of postmodernism) can be found in John S. Dryzek, "The Progress of Political Science," *Journal of Politics* 48, no. 2 (1986); and Howard Zinn, *The Politics of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970).

44. Quoted from the jacket cover of Rosenau, *Postmodernism and the Social Sciences*. Although Rosenau represents a viewpoint that is skeptical of postmodernism, similar claims are routinely advanced by defenders of the approach as well.

45. Noam Chomsky, "On Postmodernism, Theory, Fads, Etc.," no date (probably 1996), at <<http://199.172.47.21/lbbs/forums/ncpmlong.htm>>. I thank John Sonnett for bringing this citation to my attention.

46. This is also true of Thomas Kuhn's (undeniably brilliant) work, which intermittently implies that the selection of paradigms by the scientific community is

based *partly* on how well they resolve previously unexplained anomalies and *partly* on nonscientific considerations such as aesthetics; at other points, Kuhn implies that the selection of paradigms is based *solely* on nonscientific considerations. The latter proposition is an entirely different—and less plausible—argument from the first. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

All the same, it cannot be denied that Kuhn's work offers a strikingly original perspective, one that differs from traditional positivist perspectives on the history of science, since it was the first major work to demonstrate that nonscientific factors do play a significant role in the progress of physics. Postmodernist critiques of *social science* methodology, in contrast, are not original, since the salience of nonscientific influences had been recognized by orthodox social scientists long before the age of Derrida.