Perspectives on the postmodern revolution: a study of the nature and application of postmodernism through precedent

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ABSTRACT

This work is a study of postmodernism that attempts to understand the concept by analysing its comparative context. Defining my frame of reference was no easy task, and I deal equally with phenomena that have been labelled postmodern and those that have not but still fit into the wider picture that I explore. In a work like this it is important to take a wider view and understand not just the spikes of activity that demand attention but also the circumstances within which they occur and the norms on which they are founded.

One of my key concerns is how postmodernism can be understood historically as well as circumstantially. I explore at length the similarity between the political theory and philosophy of the sophists, a group of presocratic thinkers whose concerns centred around relativistic scepticism, and postmodern theorists. I am interested in comparing the two groups of thinkers not only because if they are similar postmodernism can be understood in historical terms, but also because if they exhibit differences these differences help us to clarify the nature of postmodernism. My analysis includes an examination of the intellectual and socio-political backgrounds of both groups of thinkers, and leans toward understanding the theories as normal and natural rather than truly radical or revolutionary.

Postmodernism resists conventional analysis and is something that perhaps cannot be understood holistically: certainly not from the modern perspective. It may not have a central 'truth' to understand or a limit to its reach but if we are to make any sense of it, we must study the individual whys and wherefores of postmodernism. Ultimately I do not believe that postmodernism is something radical or alien, existing somehow outside of the social order, and I have attempted to show this through rational grounded argument in this work.

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INTRODUCTION

How things are

It has taken me twelve months to research and write this dissertation and in that time I have been asked two questions innumerable times. Interested parties, ranging from friends and family, to fellow academics and polite acquaintances have asked me these questions, and I have had trouble answering them every time. The questions that I am talking about are, of course, "what are you studying" and "why"?

The first question may be difficult to answer well, but the second is even harder. This study is about understanding our world, and what we treat as normal and mundane within a historical, political and intellectual context. It will not serve to cure cancer or prevent war and my studies will not give me access to any ultimate truth but that does not mean that it is impractical or worthless. The point of this work (the "why") is to help those who read it to understand the meaning behind postmodernism: the twenty-first century's most important 'ism' and the seemingly universal answer to the question that no one asked. My usual response when people ask me what I am studying is something along the lines of "postmodernism and where it fits in with everything we think we know", but more than that, this work is about trying to get its audience inside the skin of a notoriously elusive concept by examining its content and context. We are apparently surrounded by indicators of this being the postmodern age so we *should* be concerned with what role our epoch plays in the metanarrative of human history and where we might be going (socio-politically speaking). We should also be rigorous about grounding any such investigation so as to guard against generality or speculative futurology.

My approach has been to find a point of comparison in our history and to use this to problematize the concept that postmodernity is a uniquely temporally and geographically (or equally intellectually and socially) situated

phenomenon. The mindset that we think of as unique to our age is actually, I believe, more base an understanding than we tend to realise. The understanding itself might even be considered a defence mechanism, to protect us from certain intellectual and material trends though the strength of this argument depends on how one sees the relationship between political theory and reality – a concern of the latter part of this work. In essence, what my work explores is the notion that postmodernism is not necessarily 'post'-(meaning after or following on from) modern at all, or that if it is, then perhaps the 'modern' in question is not strictly the contemporary era. The reason that I have looked to history as a point of comparison is quite simply because it is the only point of comparison that can be used. What else can the philosophy of a global epoch be compared to on this earth?

Analysis through history does have its merits and its flaws. One such aspect of this double-edged sword is the apparent certainty with which we can deal with a historical event or trend. We treat history as immutable and unchanging but this is not true, at best history is resistant to change. As our understandings of the past change, either because the current cultural climate or set of norms has changed, or because further insights into the past (such as lost works) are revealed, effectively the past as we know it does change. We talk of historical facts when actually we mean our current, and often biased opinions of what might have been. We can only view history through memory or records and how can these ever be treated as wholly accurate? Of course this doubt can just as easily extend to commentaries on the contemporary since perspective is a significant issue when writing about ones own time. The benefit of using our imperfect understanding of a period of history and treating it as a counterpoint to how we see the present is that it gives us a chance to highlight the difference between the two and analyse why they are as they are. This particular piece of analytical work can indeed only be done using history, because a wealth of facts about and commentary on our past exists, providing a foundation for understanding, whilst the present can only ever be a maelstrom of opinion and information without clarity or resolution, because we can never know how things will turn out.

I have used history as my 'other' to explore the 'self' of the present because only by looking at the face of someone else can one build a frame of reference to describe one's own reflection. The question is, where have I looked to find this history and why? The answer is that I went as far back as I could. Although this work could have compared and contrasted postmodernist thinkers with any political theorists that the world has ever known, I wanted to go to the source of our understanding: Ancient Greece. It is a falsehood to claim that there was no such thing as political philosophy before the 5th Century BC, but there is a reason that Socrates is recognised by most as the Father of Philosophy and that is because of circumstance. Greece may not still be the empire that she once was, but her culture, technology and ideas were absorbed into Europe's foundations at its earliest stage of unification. Furthermore, writings still exist from this era both due to the technology and sophistication (or perhaps rather the sophisticated division of labour) that the Ancient Greek civilisation achieved, enabling it to produce a wealth of professional intellectuals.

Plato may be the source of much written historical evidence but he was not the subject, rather his mentor Socrates and his opponents, the sophists, were. Socrates and the sophists exist at the far reach of our historical records and our intellectual understandings and yet the ideas first attributed to, and argued about by them are still fundamental ones today. Why then base my comparisons on the sophists rather than Socrates? Quite simply, because history paints them as the losers of the argument and their ideas became the Dionysian side of the canon of Western political philosophy still opposed to the Socratic starting point that over time evolved into the foundation of high modernity. I believe that, largely unconsciously, postmodern thinkers have adopted and incorporated into their work the understandings and arguments of the sophists and the question is simply about how fundamental or coincidental and convenient these ideas are.

There are of course dangers with what I have chosen to do. For a start the sophists did not produce much work that still exists today, so much of what they said has made it to these pages only second or third hand at best, and

from fragments that may have been misinterpreted or taken out of their intended context. Even if I had original texts to work from rather than biased or inaccurate commentaries, there still exist translation problems that are barriers to effective communication. The sophists theorised in Ancient Greek which presents a double barrier to my understanding: the language and, more importantly, the geo-historical contextual norms that are two and a half thousand years plus roughly the same number of kilometres, outside of my frame of understanding. A criticism that could be levelled at my methodology is that I picked the sophists as a point of comparison because of my own history studying them – they were the focus of some of my undergraduate studies. I have to accept that this criticism may have a point, like the theory I will explore I am something of a slave to my circumstances, however does my personal interest in these thinkers take anything away from them as a point of reference? Does the fact that I am interested in the core fragments of their ideas that I do understand mean that there is no point in making an intelligent analytical comparison, or worse yet, invalidate the similarities or differences I uncover? I don't think that it does, and I don't think that any potential criticisms are significant enough to stop me using the attributed source for relativist and sceptical ideas, to perform an analysis of the philosophy that presupposes these ideas to justify its importance in the contemporary world.

Over the course of this work I will expand my model of understanding and frame a basic theory. I will use my theory to explain what postmodernism is, where it has come from and where it might be going. The clear focus of this work is postmodernism, and the weighting of my attention to all of the subject matter covered (including analysis of the sophists with whom I compare postmodern thinkers) reflects this. I do not intend the theory to be prescriptive, and the finished product will not represent an accurate prediction or a formula for action. What it will serve as is an example of how theory and reality interact, and towards the end of the work this will be one of my principal concerns. Theory in isolation is meaningless and I am concerned with context and effect when I talk about the role of postmodern (or any other) theory. Taking a moment to be self reflexive, the context of this work is a tiny fragment of the analysis that has gone into the postmodern problem, and the

effect will, I hope, be to shed the smallest pinprick of light on one dimension of this field. Why contribute to a field when I have only been able to read a fraction of the literature pertaining to it? Because I want to add my name to the distinguished list of thinkers who have taken a shot in the dark and tried to explain our understanding of the human condition: how things are.

How this work is

The starting point for my study is to take a look at what postmodernism really is but I will then cover two distinct areas: firstly how postmodernism can be understood compared to sophistry (as already mentioned in this introduction), and secondly how postmodernism can be understood in the context of the contemporary world that shapes it and is shaped by it. The first half of the work is important for understanding the second half and by the time I start dealing with the more abstract questions to do with how theory and reality are interlinked, I want my reader to understand enough about postmodernism and where it comes from for it to be an example and a point of reference. The exploration of the key ideas and manifestations of postmodernism had to come first for me because it is the most important part, the foundation for everything that follows. In chapter one I will clarify terms of reference – who and what I am talking about and what the core ideas of postmodernism are. I aim to impart an initial understanding of the central concept, free from bias and un-clouded by comparison or heavy analysis. As I will explain later, *logoi* (unique conceptual understandings) cannot be transferred, bilocated or cloned, but I will attempt to evoke my understanding of postmodernism in the reader.

After the first chapter frames a basic understanding of postmodernism in the readers mind, the second will move away from it entirely and on to the sophists. I will explain the background to their theorising, the specifics of their ideas and the general conclusions that history leads us to believe they drew. As already mentioned in this section I am using the sophists because I see

their ideas as remarkably similar to those of certain postmodernist thinkers and I want to explore why this might be the case, but also I think that understanding a historic theory with the benefits of hindsight and centuries of study is useful for getting a handle on the political philosophy that pervades our society. You may start to see the similarities that I will draw even before the end of this chapter and because of this I launch straight into an analytical comparison of postmodernism and sophistry with my third chapter. The comparison I make is something that I hope will differentiate my work from the many existing works that are more reasoned and detailed equivalents of my first two chapters. I cannot claim complete originality of course since there are others who have seen the same potential link as myself. Professor Stephen Hicks, for instance, claims that, "Postmodernists are not original. The irrational seldom are. Postmodernists are rewarmed Sophists from Ancient Greece of 2400 years ago."[1] None the less I feel that the comparison and how I handle it has worth and is an appropriate lynchpin of my work and a good foundation for the more ethereal concerns of the second half of this work.

Having detailed the similarities of postmodern and sophistic theory in chapter three I use chapter four to present some alternatives. There are undoubtedly many sources from which postmodern ideas have been drawn. Chapter four looks at intellectual inspirations for postmodernism and chapter five looks at practical socio-political inspirations. Both of these chapters further explain postmodernism by detailing important aspects of its context and examining certain instances of it in more depth. They also lead on to chapter six which revisits my comparison of the sophists and postmodernists but focuses this time on how similar the circumstances (intellectual and material) of the two ages are. I believe there are historic similarities that led to the build up of relativist theory in the ancient and modern worlds. These similarities are found in the contexts that the relativists engaged with. In simple terms, the worlds of these thinkers share certain traits that I believed made the production of the resulting theories inevitable, regardless of specific individual

[1] Hicks, *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault* (Tempe: Scholargy Publishing, 2004), p.182

theorists. Chapter six will focus showing a link between the circumstances that supported sophistry and postmodernism, according to the notion that the similarity of the theories is more than just coincidental. The alternatives that I see are that either postmodernism has mimicked sophistry (which is a possibility given founding postmodernist thinkers like Nietzsche were also avid historians, and the general propensity for 20th Century thinkers to recycle intellectual property both seriously and irreverently) or that similar times have produced similar theories.

While researching chapter six, chapter seven really wrote itself, and from there on I move away from my core comparison somewhat and engage in what seems like an intellectual domino effect. My concern arising from comparing Ancient Greece and the modern world in order to prove or disprove a similarity of social circumstance is as follows: what difference does social circumstance make to political theorising and the intellectual pursuit of high philosophy? More simply put, what is the relationship between political reality and political theory? Chapters seven, eight and nine all follow on from this as I deal with firstly the relationship between globalisation and postmodernism (questioning if globalising pressures led to the birth of the postmodern mindset) then the relationship between any theory and its reality, before finally I come to rest on the core concern that inspired this dissertation: what effect does postmodernism have on the world around us and what effect might it go on to have?

Overall this structure is rather like a roller coaster: it warms up by defining its terms, detailing postmodernism and the tool of comparison to be used (sophistry) then in chapter three there is the first little rush as the comparison is made proper and revelations about postmodernism whistle past us. After this there is another uphill slope where context for further comparison, this time of circumstances, is detailed and a picture is painted allowing for chapter six to speed downhill again throwing out ideas as it goes. From chapter six onwards, the second half of the ride does not slow down, it follows a line of questions (do circumstances shape theory, what then is the point of theory, can theory affect reality, what effect does postmodern theory have on the

world around us and what effect will it continue to have in the future as part of the wider historic picture?). These questions are the corkscrews and loops of the ride and each one leaves us breathless. At the end of the ride we look back and marvel at how much we have covered and how seamlessly the different thrills of the ride fitted together.

My goal is a lofty one: I want to define one of the most elusive concepts in contemporary politics and then show the method behind a theory that rejects method as we understand it. I hope to evoke the same understanding in my audience that I believe to be true without reference to any universal truths and without the crutch of empirical evidence. I plan to link a number of complex concepts, any of which I could focus this entire dissertation on without necessarily saying anything new or of worth. Perhaps hardest of all I want to try and keep this study grounded in reality and academically rigorous. I want this work to be worth something and yet I am ignorant as to what worth really is, and fully aware that there is probably no such thing as true worth because no thinker in human history has ever fully disproved the relativist concept that man is the measure of all things.

The hypothesis that a year ago I took to my supervisor when I started planning this work, was that globalization is a catalyst for postmodern theorising, which itself is not unprecedented. I believed that moral relativism and fragmentation are the way that Western cultures deal with the pressures of having become part of an international or global community, which involves sharing space and consciousness with 'the other'. Space-time compression has removed the distance from the self-other relationship, and this has had an impact on the collective psyche of communities, resulting in the doubting theory that in the contemporary world we term postmodernism (but in the 5th Century BC was termed sophistry). Along the course of studying this, my interests have evolved, particularly to the inclusion of some general musings about the role of political theory. I invite you to join me in experiencing the intellectual journey that I have taken.

POSTMODERNISM

This chapter will define and discuss the postmodern. I will begin by considering some general statements about the nature of postmodernism and I will support these with reference to associated core texts. The discussion will not be confined to the original formulations of Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard and other archetypal thinkers, as I believe that postmodernity is exhibited in many ways and places which are all important to consider. My aim here is to provide a framework for understanding postmodernism so that I might later comment on its origins, implications and role.

Defining postmodernism

Georg Simmel claimed that 'Defining Postmodernism is like trying to catch a fish in your hands', and it is one of the few things about postmodernism that is not debated or disputed. Some call postmodernism a phenomenon, whilst others label it a condition, a theory, an ideology, a movement, a moment, a mindset or even a paradox. This issue of terminology reveals how confused academic thought is on what postmodernism, or the postmodern, actually is and the confusion is not something that I am aiming to solve even if that goal was accomplishable. What I do intend to do is explore some of the facets of, and issues connected to postmodernity and theorise about how temporally and spatially unique 'the postmodern' is, and in order to do that I need a working definition.

Popular understandings of postmodernism are confused at best, but the impression that exists is that it is a mindset that asks questions. A few definitions that I uncovered in the briefest of internet searches show how it is understood to be a method of analysis that rejects convention. According to one dictionary, the postmodern is:

> A loose body of thought/criticism which holds that all knowledge processes are richly informed by personal aims and cultural world-views. All knowledge processes, including modern scientific theories, are constructed in and for a given socio-cultural life world; thus social theory may best be seen as a subjective narrative or text which legitimates existing or desired social relationships.[2]

And according to another, postmodernism is:

> A philosophical concept that allows the perceiver to perform analysis on any given text without the presupposition of boundaries, limits, or structures. In essence, postmodernism assumes hypertextual mediums which are inherently fragmented in nature. Simply, this mode of thought is a rejection of modernist structuralism. Instead of determining absolute truth, postmodernism seeks to achieve relative coherence.[3]

Put more simply, postmodernists understand that:

> Social and cultural reality, as well as social science itself, is a human construction.[4]

What all of these definitions share is an understanding that postmodernism rejects the rules of modernity and questions why things are as they are. In essence, the plural discourse of postmodernism challenges the rigid homogenisation of modern society. Put more simply, postmodernism works to provide alternatives to the hegemony of modernity and it seeks to reverse the trend of narrowing down options in society to the one most rational choice – the phenomenon of Macdonaldization that is a hallmark of modernity.[5]

A more comprehensive definition is offered in a text-book that I have found very helpful throughout this study. Lawrence Cahoone claims in his introduction that,

> Five prominent postmodern themes can be distinguishes; four are objects of its criticism, and one constitutes its positive method. Postmodernism typically criticises: *presence* or presentation (versus representation and construction), *origin* (versus

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[2] [http://www.public.iastate.edu/~rmazur/dictionary/p.html] 19/04/04
[3] [http://hyper.vcsun.org/HyperNews/battias/get/coms633/f2001/pomodef/4.html?nogifs] 19/04/04
[4] [oregonstate.edu/dept/anthropology/glossary2.htm] 19/04/04
[5] Ritzer, *The Macdonaldization Thesis: Extensions and Explorations* (London: Sage, 1998)

> phenomena), *unity* (versus plurality), and *transcendence* of norms (versus their immanence). It typically offers an analysis of phenomenon through *constitutive otherness*.[6]

What Cahoone is claiming is that firstly postmodernism rejects the immediate presence (existence) of objects independent of symbolism. Secondly it rejects the idea of finding a deeper meaning behind phenomena based on original circumstances: what an author intended is irrelevant to what a text means because dealing with more than the superficial becomes guesswork rather than analysis. No analysis can be complete or final because everything is constituted in infinite relations. This leads on to the third point, which is that postmodernism rejects the idea of a single integral existence or concept because we can never fully understand how all of existence interacts. Even an individual is not a unity and is better understood as a multiplicity of forces: many selves rather than one self. The final rejection of postmodernism is the idea that norms are transcendent or universally valuable. Ideas such as truth and justice are not independent of the process that they supposedly serve to govern and are indeed a product of that process. The critical analysis of postmodernism problematizes all normative claims, including those made by postmodernists, the same way that it problematizes prime (immediate surface) meaning, the concept of deeper meaning and the idea of a singular meaning. Cahoone's final claim is that an object or self exists only in the absence of, or more accurately in the presence of and observable contrasting difference to, an 'other'. Basically, a thing only makes sense if it is not something else – which is an old but still fascinating idea.[7]

Even this definition fails to reveal the depth or colour of the postmodern picture. In order to fill in some more of that picture I will discuss some of the issues relating to the practice of postmodernism, its politics and the effect that they have had on the tangible structures of society, but first I must pay heed to the words of those attributed with founding (or perhaps rather discovering)

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[6] Cahoone, *From Modernism to Postmodernism: an Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1996), p.14

[7] Cahoone, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*

this mindset. I turn now to the work of the original postmodernists whose ideas are framed in the setting of 1960s France.

Claude Levi-Strauss developed the concept of structural anthropology and initiated the intellectual trend known as structuralism by drawing on the prolific reading he did in the fields of geology, law philosophy and linguistics. Perhaps his most prominent influence was the Swiss professor of linguistics Ferdinand de Saussure who focussed not on the meaning of words but on the patterns that they formed. Levi-Straus developed this idea and tried to provide an insight into how the human mind understands anything. He claimed that, "Man passes from a natural to a cultural state as he uses language, learns to cook, etc... Structuralism considers that in the passage from natural to cultural, man obeys laws he does not invent it's a mechanism of the human brain."[8] The implication of this understanding is to view man not as a privileged inhabitant of the universe, but as a transient species that adheres to universal laws and structures. Universalism governs the structures of human thought and consequently the conduct of human activity according to this understanding, and this allowed Levi-Strauss and the structuralists who followed him, to inductively generalise about the structures of all human societies.

Structuralism, as framed by Levi-Strauss and developed by Georges Canguilhem, Michel Serres, Louis Althusser, Jaques Lacan and Ronald Barthes, conflicted with the conventionalist position of Jean-Paul Satre. Satre had understood our way of categorizing the world as unique, and drawing off the works of Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, those who followed Levi-Strauss laid into this understanding's unsubstantiated claims about the centrality of subject with unsubstantiated claims of their own. I feel that this opened up structuralism itself to criticisms for being too general, because it really did no better at proving its understanding to be true than did the theory it sought to replace. Criticism came from those who disagreed with such a universal and unsubstantiated theory, appealing to paragon principals behind structures,

[8] Schmitt, 'Claude Levi-Strauss' (1999)
[http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/information/biography/klmno/levi-strauss_claude.html] 12/07/04

and the champion of such criticism of the structuralist position was Michel Foulcault. Poststructuralism was the immediate forerunner to postmodernism and it served to pioneer some of the deconstructionist ideas at the heart of postmodernism. Structuralism was seen to have failed to sustain its claim to provide objective scientific knowledge because it focussed too much on removing the perspective of the subject from science, and not enough on empirical adequacy.[9]

The importance of understanding structuralism for this study is that it leads to an understanding of what followed it. Gutting writes that,

> Poststructuralism combines the structuralist *style* of objective, technical, and even formal discourse about the human world with a rejection of the structuralist *claim* that there is any deep or final truth that such discourse can discover. The poststructuralist project need not be self-contradictory, but it is inevitably ironic, since it sees its method of analysis as both necessary and, given traditional goals, doomed to failure.[10]

The similarity with postmodernism is clear and that is because the one evolved out of the other. Postmodernism took up the torch of fundamentally challenging the core intellectual ideals of philosophy that had existed since Plato, based on the intellectual path-beating work done by the poststructuralists. Foucault and Derrida are perhaps best seen as bridging this academic distinction, as they applied their radical project of questioning the ideal of ultimate knowledge to general philosophy as well as the prior concerns of phenomenological and structural inquiry.

Foucault and Derrida were concerned with deconstructing the concept of order as is shown by the former thinker's work on madness in *Folie et deraison* (1961) and the latter thinkers concept of *difference.* Perhaps though the final emergence of postmodern thinking is best credited to Jean-Franciois Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze and Luce Irigaray who worked to produce extensive studies of 'the differend', difference and sexual differences respectively. A

[9] Gutting, 'The Structuralist Invasion', in, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)
[10] Gutting, 'The Structuralist Invasion', in, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century,* p.250

thesis could be written solely upon how postmodern each of the five thinkers mentioned in this paragraph are, since the lines of definition are blurred at best. Perhaps it is not even important which among them we should label as the first postmodernist since together, their work forms the starting point from which postmodernism has blossomed. They framed the focus of the field by concerning themselves with the unconventional and the abnormal, studying them for the sake of understanding our concept of the standard, rather than to reveal the kind of universal truths that their predecessors had sought but which they themselves rejected.

Already I have been unfaithful to the idea of postmodernism by labelling it so simplistically and unanimously and by trying to pin an original postmodern theorist to it. Every theorist who talks about or critiques postmodernism has a different idea of what it actually is. Some argue that postmodernism is a myth, some claim that it is over stated and some see it everywhere they look. Every theorist constructs their own postmodernism none of which are more universally correct than any others because all understandings of postmodernism are unique fictions based on interpretation.[11] There is no true postmodernism or higher postmodernist that all postmodern theories resemble in a Platonic sense, and there is barely even a core principle that holds the movement together. Acceptance of this is central to what I understand the postmodern to be: a relativist framework for understanding. According to postmodern tenets, there is no single true postmodernism, there are not even guidelines that distinguish a postmodern method. On the other hand, the postmodern movement is something that I believe exists in verifiable terms and it exists because its members share certain beliefs, the unifying elements of theory that are the essence of postmodernism.

Fundamentally, postmodernism is the rejection of generalizations (a sentiment only legitimated by the internally reflexive and irreverent nature of postmodernism). It is a discourse that reconsiders the obvious in light of the possibility that assumed fundamentals are mutable or non-existent. Because

[11] Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London & New York: Routledge, 1989)

of its individual and speculative nature, no two theorists will necessarily (or even probably) employ the same exact method or reach the same exact conclusions about any issue. A good example of this is the differing opinions of two prestigious postmodernist thinkers of the1970s and 80s, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Daniel Bell, about the nature of postmodernism itself. Lyotard claimed that postmodernism was all about 'incredulity toward metanarrative'[12] and Bell claimed that it was the rejection of bourgeois empirical rational pragmatism[13]. These definitions take different approaches to the subject matter; the first more philosophically and sociologically oriented than the second, a more practical and political definition, but what they share is an inclination towards the same postmodern purpose or essence.

Postmodernism in context

One thing that all understandings about postmodernism do share is a realization that postmodernism cannot exist on its own. An isolated instance of postmodernism cannot exist because at its core the theory is critical and reactionary. A good analogy for understanding this is the assertion that postmodernism is a parasitic facet of modernity. By nature, it feeds on the dissatisfaction that modernity breeds as a by-product of rationalization (a dissatisfaction that Weber links to the iron cage of bureaucracy that modernity creates) and reacts against it.[14] The understanding of a postmodern epoch that comes, as the name suggests, after modernity is a little misleading, as for postmodernity to be maintained, there must also still be modernity. A better understanding, which this essay will utilise, is that postmodernism is an aspect of modernity that is both important in its own right, and part of a wider socio-political picture.

In practical terms (as exhibited by grassroots political movements) postmodernists are minorities in our society that can affect only minor social

[12] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984)
[13] Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976)
[14] Heller and Feher, *The Postmodern Political Condition* (Padstow: Polity Press, 1988)

changes. They cannot change the system or engage in mass politics because when they gain enough power to influence the mainstream they become part of it. Postmodernism can never succeed the status quo because if it engages in the business of changing society it will itself change. Equally, there will always be a critical (discontent) element of society so postmodernism will never truly die out. If everything that opposes modernity is postmodern then as long as an instance of modernity exists, so will a proportional instance of postmodernity. Best and Kellner make an interesting point when explaining the purpose of postmodern political movements: they claim that,

> Without systemic emphasis, cultural and identity politics remain confined to the margins of society and are in danger of degenerating into narcissism, hedonism, aestheticism, or personal therapy, where they pose no danger and are immediately co-opted by the culture industries. In such cases, the political is merely the personal, and the original intentions of the 1960s goal to broaden the political field are inverted and perverted.[15]

This recognition of the limitations of applied postmodernism is important, and when talking about the politics of postmodernity, one must recognise its subjectivity and fragility. Postmodern political movements are perhaps not capable of changing the world but more importantly, the transformation of society as a whole does not fall within their remit, it is not their concern.

It is at least possible that the business of postmodernism is not to cause the collapse of the modern world but rather to reinforce the status quo; something that it does in two ways. Firstly postmodernism extends liberalism to its natural end and is the inevitable result of the proliferation of free market ideology and entrepreneurialism. The children of the 1980s have polluted every aspect of civil society with their individualist-consumerist outlook, which can at times seem like liberalism gone crazy, but which still fundamentally attends to the ideology behind modernity and legitimates the modern world accordingly. Secondly, and perhaps even more convincingly, postmodernism

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[15] Best and Kellner, *Dawns, Twilights, and Transitions: Postmodern Theories, Politics, and Challenges* [http://www.democracynature.org/dn/vol7/best_kellner_postmodernism.htm] 28/06/04

divides opposition to modernity, fulfilling (deliberately or otherwise) a role similar to that of socialism during the Cold War period. It acts as an intermediary measure between capitalism and something else, between the conservative and the radical, whose impact is to dilute revolutionary spirit rather than mustering it. It promises gradual change even when revolution might be the only real way of changing things, and thus plays a role in maintaining the status quo. One step further down this line of analysis might be to consider this role as deliberate: postmodern sentiments and activities could perhaps be a pressure valve that plays a role in the self perpetuation of the machinery of modernity.

The understanding of postmodern structural motivations that I most favour is that penned by Heller and Feher, who claim that postmodernism is neither revolutionary nor conservative but exists outside of predefined politics. They see pluralist cultural relativism as the product of a disillusioned 'alienation generation' who did not conform to the norms that would allow political categorization in the left-right spectrum or any other traditional measure.[16] The problem with this theory being correct is that it implies that postmodernism is apolitical, something that clearly is not the case: the business of postmodernism is to offer political choice and reallocate public attention. My solution to this dilemma is to understand that problems finding a label for political trends and movements, that I consider postmodern, are the fault of the labelling system. How can a system founded on the assumed norms of contemporary society evaluate a theory that is reacting against that society and finding alternatives to that which is taken for granted?

I do not believe that postmodernism is a unifying resistance theory; instead, as I understand it, it actually coexists with the structures of modernity rather than trying to reinforce or overthrow them. A possible reason for this coexistence is that postmodernism is born of modernity and feeds off it, unable to remain viable on its own. An alternative to this option is perhaps

[16] Heller and Feher, *The Postmodern Political Condition*

that as a theory, postmodernism simply does not incite action at all. Boggs claims that,

> Despite its critical and oppositional language, postmodernism is actually system-reproducing in its celebration of fragmented, localized, and (occasionally) private discourses; it fits the imperatives of corporate colonization, partly because, in its extreme formulations, it gives rise to a disempowering nihilism.[17]

What he believes is that postmodernism is an intellectual and cultural reaction (or perhaps more accurately a spectrum of reactions) to the collapse of established ideological paradigms. The effect on society of this collapse is a disbelief that ideologies can be politically implemented and this results in the fragmentation of the macro realm of politics.

When the macro realm of politics fails us, the focus of politics shifts to encompass less traditionally political issues such as identity as a mechanism of change, and issues that were formerly considered part of the private sphere become public. The political arena becomes public property but it is not used for anything more than administration by the disenchanted and disempowered. Fundamental changes to human life rise up from the informal organization of individuals with shared interests – imagined communities and new social movements – and political theory is reincarnated in a form appropriate to the time. Politics changes according to our needs, and even a nihilistic postmodernism cannot kill anything more than the contemporary form that it takes: every interchange of power is a political transaction, and for society to function 'politics' as we understand it must change. The reason that it always adapts rather that ever being replaced is best explained by Lyotard who claims that, "everything is politics" in the sense that "politics is the possibility of the differend on the occasion of the slightest linkage."[18] I feel that this understanding is well supported by the observable change to the remits of public and private spheres in the last half century. That important social issues now include domestic violence, child abuse and binge drinking

[17] Boggs, *The End of Politics: corporate power and the decline of the public sphere* (New York & London: The Guildford Press, 2000), p. 221

[18] Lyotard, *The Differend,* trans. Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p.139

is telling of how private and personal matters of the past have become more obviously political.

Contemporary postmodernism

Boggs is not alone in recognising that postmodernism means the fragmentation of traditional structures. Lyotard, Foucault and Butler, to name just a few, all agree that postmodernism is a rejection of normative power relationships and the assumed way of, and reason for, doing things. Postmodernism and poststructuralism go hand in hand, they are products of the same circumstance and have the same goals: to undermine the ideological and methodological assumptions of modernity. That said, they are not the same thing and postmodernism can coexist with some fairly fundamental structures of modernity – indeed it has to if it is to exist at all in the modern world.

Whilst on a micro-sociological level postmodern pluralism has caused fragmentation, the corporate system remains stable.[19] This might lead a theorist to claim that postmodernism is all talk, and the phenomenon associated with it, namely new social movements, are of little importance because they do not effect the economic foundations of society (the base in Marxian terms). I disagree with this assertion and believe that it is not possible to categorise postmodernism as a purely social phenomenon because of the way that the social, political and economic spheres are intrinsically linked. Relativist pluralism affects politics as is observable in the conception of contemporary phenomenon such as identity politics and post-materialism. The effects of new ways of thinking on the wider macro-economic picture are more subtle, but none the less the impact of cottage industries, alternative forms and goals of entrepreneurialism and demands for alternative work conditions (such as holiday purchase options) lobbied for not by unions, but negotiated by individuals, are of growing importance.

[19] Boggs, *The End of Politics*

The actual political effects of new social movements (the social manifestations of postmodernism) are wide and varied. This in a way represents the nature of the postmodern 'mixed bag' or 'anything goes' attitude but is also a good indicator of the reaction of wider society towards the shake-up theory. One example of a social movement that has enjoyed high levels of political success is the women's movement, which has been able to work within and without the existing institution for change. Feminist theory now often employs aspects of the postmodern in looking at the alternatives to the patriarchal system, drawing from fundamental philosophies and the structural and gender-norms that are found in other cultures. Postmodern relativism, critical deconstruction techniques and interpretive identity based politics can be strong allies of feminism. That said however, the women's movement made some of its most significant gains during the early modern era and has a lot to thank rationalization for. Also, the women's movement has arguably been more divided than aided by postmodernism as feminists argue amongst themselves about the various merits of 'equal' versus 'different' (postmodernism having introduced the concept that women could be gauged on a different scale to men rather than being measured as inferior or superior to them).

Mary Gergen states in the abstract to her article *Facing Off: Postmodern/Feminism,* that "While postmodernism invites us to engage in continual dismantling of the grand narratives of progress and 'the good', other feminists hold to an evaluative foundation in their analysis of societal positionings."[20] This quote expresses well the fears of conventional feminists who see their achievements as being undermined by the restructuring of value that postmodernists seek to achieve. In essence feminists, and other marginal groups, who have worked hard to make significant political gains now stand to lose something: they will inevitably suffer internal strife because they are changing from being revolutionary to conservative. Worse yet for such groups, their members are changing their personal objectives at

[20] Gergen, *Facing Off: Postmodern/Feminism* [http://www.taosinstitute.net/manuscripts/facingoff.html] 01/02/05

different rates, pulling the organizations in different directions and leading to fragmentation. In the case of feminism, whilst progressives like Fine and Gordon suggest we should, "understand gender as a relational concept full of power and possibilities; ... we need to disrupt prevailing notions of what is inevitable, what is natural, and what is impossible. We need, therefore, to invent and publish images of what is not now, and what could be"[21], this is not a universally embraced approach and theorists like Margo Culley see it as more than ironic that as women and ethnic minorities have become strong, the concepts on which their strength is founded are attacked.

The effect of postmodernism on feminism has been more than simply to cause conflict. As my case study, feminism shows how even as the destructive wave of postmodern criticism breaks upon a subject, it contributes to it, and leaves a novel fusion of ideas in its wake. Christine Di Stefano claimed that the power of feminism stemmed from modernism because of its emphasis on gender. [22] Stark prejudices and inequalities between men and women made resistance possible, however the light of postmodernism lays bare the generalisation inherent in this argument. Women are different by several factors, such as class, race, and cultural background: postmodern feminists must account for specifics. To a postmodern feminist, any methodology of abstraction is meaningless: instead the personal experiences of women, no matter how diverse, have needed to be embraced. Mary Joe Frug is accredited with providing a valid function of the postmodern critique with her claims that, "discourse should be recognized as a site of political struggle" and "sex difference has a semiotic character which is constituted by systems of signs that we produce and interpret, although the meaning of gender is undeterminable or undecidable."[23] To my mind, the influence of postmodernism on this movement could not be clearer.

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[21] Fine & Gordon, 'Effacing the centre and the margins: Life at the intersection of psychology and feminism.' *Feminism & Psychology: 1* (1991), p.24

[22] Nicholson, 'Luce Irigaray and Nancy Hartstock' Postmodernism and Feminism (London & New York: Routledge, 1990), p.85

[23] Frug, Postmodern Legal Feminism, (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), p.126

Interest groups now enjoy a great deal of political success, and just looking at the influence that they have over British or American public policy reveals how extensive and integral macro-political fragmentation is within contemporary society. Representation has been extended across the board and although it is not necessarily equal, it is available to all (within material constraints). Every identity has become represented and this leads to problems since clearly opposed identities will clash on the political battleground and in the postmodern era consensus is often not embraced due to the diminished value of conclusions.

> Lyotard's [postmodern] politics is a politics of endless conflict and protest, with seemingly no possibility of constructive agreement – one might even say no possibility of politics at all.[24]

A good practical example of this is the situation in the United States when two of the polar interest groups clash, for instance when the pro-life and pro-choice movements get involved with a piece of legislation. Often the input of single-issue groups who see continued battle as preferable to a compromise can slow down the legislative process and lead to ever shifting laws, based on viability, which are emphatically pragmatic and inherently confused.[25] From the Lyotard perspective, all consensuses are bad, whilst all variation is good making meaningful politics impossible.

In the name of diversity postmodernism has enabled the creation of a number of interesting groups that tackle issues from a new (though not necessarily an original) perspective. A good example of this is the political revival of the Religious Right in the United States, particularly as linked to the issue of abortion. The New Right and the Christian Right grew up alongside the issue and both represent a rather postmodern backlash against liberalism. The former was a response to the liberal consensus or the 1950s and 60s, which combined libertarianism and traditionalism to justify capitalist order on moral grounds. The latter also arose in reaction to the liberal consensus and based

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[24] Adams & Dyson, *Fifty Major Political Thinkers: Jean-Francois Lyotard* (London & New York: Routledge, 2003), p.239

[25] McKay, *American Politics and Society 4th Edition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997)

its policy on opposing the erosion of traditional religious morality that the liberal consensus had caused. The Religious Right advocated a return to family values and a post materialist moral outlook.[26]

The postmodern definition

One must marvel at the contradictions that exist within postmodernism. On a practical level, both groups that encourage liberal free choice and highly restrictive and traditional movements are born of the same understanding. From an intellectual standpoint as well as a political one, postmodernism seems weakened by being so broad as to encompass such extremes. Furthermore, postmodernism seems to fundamentally undermine itself by being a progressive metanarrative, every bit the 'grand theory' that modernity is at the same time as it rejects that concept. This however is what makes postmodernism unique.

Postmodern politics is something new and interesting. It is difficult to pin down because it seems simultaneously to encompass a great deal and to barely exist. When I talk about postmodern philosophy in this essay I will usually mean the rejection of grand theory and the diversification of ideas and options. When I refer to postmodern politics I will usually be talking about the new forms that politics is adopting: identity politics and the activities of interest or issue groups within the contemporary political arena. It is difficult to be precise when dealing with the postmodern because the terms used are limited only by their application within the bounds of the discussion. An absolute definition is, according to postmodern semantics, inherently impossible.

For me, postmodernism is centred around rejecting generalizations, simplistic explanations and assumed knowledge. Over arching theories that explain everything are not useful to this critical discipline. To be a postmodernist one

[26] Durham, *The Christian Right, the Far Right and the Boundaries of American Conservatism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000)

must deal in specific terms and rely on intuitive understanding rather than culturally implanted assumptions or reference to scientific fact. 'Truth' does not exist independent of the conclusions we draw and the beliefs we (deliberately or otherwise) impress upon others. Postmodernism treads a fine line between being meaninglessly self indulgent, concerned with every word to the point where the sentence and sentiment are lost, and being unfaithful to itself by falling into the pitfall of modernity. To understand some aspects of postmodernism, one must simply be content to accept them.

SOPHISTRY

Whilst it is true that postmodernism is a theory drawn from a multitude of other theories, I believe that one particular theory is most closely associated with it. This section of my thesis will attempt to show that a great deal of the methodology and theoretical content of postmodernity is actually quite pre-modern in origin. The way that this will be done is by looking at the (pre-) philosophy of the sophists, a group of intellectuals and educators in the 5th Century BC. First I intend to clarify the theorists that this essay is concerned with and set the intellectual scene for their theorising, then I will detail their approach and conclusions. Astute readers will realise that my detailing of sophistry in this chapter is a good deal more methodical than my treatment of postmodernism in the last, and this I account for in two ways. Firstly, the subject matter of this chapter has been dealt with by many secondary sources since the time of the sophists, and opinions about them have settled and become established. I hope to use some of this established understanding for my own analysis, and so I have attempted to remain faithful to it here. The second reason for the two chapters seeming stylistically different is that I found when researching and writing the last chapter, the form that it took was influenced by some features of the subject matter. My hope is that by utilising the clarity of history I will present here, we will better be able to understand the nuances of postmodernism that the maelstrom of the present hides from our sight.

Talking about 'the sophists' is about as unclear as talking about 'the postmodernists' because they were not a school in the conventional sense and simply shared some understandings about how to address important issues of their time (issues which I believe are in fact timeless). They were all professional educators who considered philosophical, political and social issues from a pragmatic, relativist viewpoint. The specific individuals who I am most concerned with and to whom I will be referring when I mention the sophists, are Protagoras of Abdera, Gorgias of Leontini, Thrasymachus of Chalcedon and Callicles of Athens, though there were many more individuals

who shared their understanding of the world and even added to the wealth of sophistic theory that has now been largely forgotten. For the general purpose of this essay I am taking the dates of the sophists to be between circa 450 and 380 BC.

The intellectual context of the sophists

What was distinctive about the theory of the sophists was that it rejected the optimistic pre-science of the Ionian thinkers of the 6th Century BC (Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes, all of Miletus, and Heraclitus of Ephesus specifically). These early scientists made, 'the first really rational attempts to describe the nature of the world'[27] utilising what would later become known as the framework of idealism, but their attempts had flaws which the sophists helped to reveal. Thales and his contemporaries retro-engineered their understandings of the world to theorise about the *logos*, a universal account or truth, and they introduced the concept of cosmic order or natural law. According to Aristotle,

> Most of the original seekers of knowledge recognised only first principles of the material kind as the first principles of all things. For that out of which all existing things are formed – from which they originally come into existence and into which they are finally destroyed – whose substance persists while changing its qualities, this, they say, is the element and first principle of all things.[28]

Reductionist presocratic science led Thales to claim that water was the quintessential substance of the universe since it was needed for growth. Although this supposed deduction was arguably influenced by Babylonian and Egyptian creation myths and only comes to us now through fragments reported on by Aristotle, it still seems to be the first justified atheistic account of how the world was formed of this era.

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[27] Kirk, Raven and Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers 2nd Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p.75

[28] Aristotle, *Metaphysics:* a revised text with introduction and commentary by W.D. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924), 983b6

Others followed Thales in trying to frame an understanding of the world's origin and in doing practical scientific work. Anaximander concluded that *apeiron,* the limitless or infinite, was the balance between all states of matter and it was from this that everything else formed. It was a mixture of opposites, never clearly defined, which might indicate that he thought all stuffs of the universe could change into one another making it wrong to prioritise any one above the others. He also is credited with drawing the first map of the world and possibly inventing the *gnomon,* a time measuring device, though again there is evidence that this was borrowed from Babylonia.[29] Anaximenes took a different view and asserted that air condensed or refracted into everything else on the basis that the universe represented a large scale version of the human body. "Just as in us, he says, soul, which is air, holds us together, so the whole universe is surrounded by wind and air."[30]

Heraclitus was perhaps the last significant Milesian, and he theorised that fire was the archetypal state of matter. He also concerned himself with 'the *logos',* which was something that the wise man can listen to in order to know. Heraclitus reasoned that although the world was always in a state of flux, a single, consistent, divine law existed beneath this flux – an idea that has persisted and was exhibited in the thought of Plato and much Christian thought that was (and still is) influenced by Ancient Greek ideas. What all of the theories of the Milesian scientific philosophers shared was the fact that they were based entirely on the beliefs of the theorist and lacked proper scientific falsifiability. They were positive constructive ideas, but there was no good reason why one was right and the others were wrong; a problem considering the mutually exclusive nature of their 'truths'.

Parmenides of Elea represented a turning point in the history of philosophy and it was his ideas that paved the way for intellectual scepticism and sophistry. The break that he represented from tradition is best represented

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[29] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* trans. Hicks (London: Heinemann, 1925)
[30] Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 3 vols., ed. Kranz, 6th edition (Zurich: Weidmann, 1951-2) 13B2 (Aetius *Opinions* 1.3.4.1-8 Diels)

by Eudemus of Rhodes' claim that, "Parmenides would not agree with anything unless it seemed necessary, whereas his predecessors used to come up with unsubstantiated assertions."[31] Parmenides famously exposed the contradictions within the science of the Milesians and pointed out the difference between truth and moral opinion. He challenged their explanations of the nature of the world by looking for proof, and found that all the Ionian thinkers could offer was opinion, rather than fact or truth.[32] Parmenides went on to distinguish between the way of truth and the way of appearance: he claimed that over reliance on common sense and physical sensations confused our understanding of the nature of existence and, following this logic, he concluded that empirical enquiry was impossible and that experimentation could not reveal truth. The only thing that we can say, according to this logic, is that 'the world is'.

Zeno of Elea followed up on what Parmenides started when he conceived of the paradox; a device designed to disprove common sense and show that what people may observe in the physical world is not necessarily logically possible. His paradoxes call into question not only sensory perception, but also our communal understanding of reality (what Durkheim would later label as an aspect of society's *Conscience Collective*[33]). Essentially, Parmenides and Zeno painted philosophy into a corner and left a legacy of doubt in their wake. The people of Ancient Athens were losing faith in their gods but they had also just had their sciences disproved. Robin Waterfield, in his introduction to this era, defines the relationship between the sophists and their world very well I feel:

> It might seem puzzling to say that the Sophists were the heirs of the Presocratics, since at first glance the two groups seem to be divided, not united by their interests... The Sophists were more interested in language, in all aspects of *logos*, than they were in the nature and origin of the world. However the Sophists were the immediate heirs of the Presocratic scientific revolution in the sense that, once the Presocratics had made the world at least potentially comprehensible to the human mind, a

[31] Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 28A28 (Eudemus in Simplicius, *Commentary on Aristotle's 'Physics'*, CAG IX, 116.2-4 Diels)
[32] Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982)
[33] Craib, *Classical Social Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)

> humanist or anthropocentric emphasis on the importance of human beings was inevitable. The Sophists were the first seriously to raise questions in moral, social, and political philosophy.[34]

The political theory of the sophists

The sophists theorised against this backdrop of doubt and chose to reject the "progress" made by the thinkers who came before them. They were highly sceptical of presocratic science and of the structures of understanding that it produced. Like postmodern thinkers, they questioned the natural and obvious and produced a radically different understanding of how men should behave. Central to this understanding was the concept of moral relativism: the idea that if all that we have is *doxa,* belief or opinion, we cannot act with certainty and individuals must therefore make moral choices without absolute guidelines to use as a compass. This led Protagoras of Abdera to assert that "man is the measure of all things – of the things that are, that they are; of things that are not, that they are not."[35]

Protagoras was *the* master sophist, and despite Plato's low opinion of him, he was probably one of the best and most important presocratic philosophers. He believed firmly in democracy and claimed that he taught people to be good citizens by enabling them to better make rational arguments. His critics dispute this and claim that he simply taught the art of making the weaker argument defeat the stronger, but what they did not question was the fact that he was a political and philosophical relativist without reserve, as is exemplified by this excerpt from his writings.

> If the wind is blowing on me and on you, and it appears warm to me but cold to you, then it is really hot for me and cold for you... it is true both that the wind is hot and that the wind is cold. Similarly, moral truths depend on the outlook of a given society. We (Greeks) know that killing an innocent person is wrong, since it is prohibited by the conventions of our society. But it is equally true that killing an innocent person is

[34] Waterfield, *The First Philosophers: The Presocratics and the Sophists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.xxix
[35] Plato, *Theaetetus,* trans. McDowell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973)

> right, if it conforms to the appearances of some other society. Truth and reality depend on convention.[36]

Although a postmodern theorist would phrase it differently, Protagoras' sentiment of cultural relativity would not be all that alien to them. Judith Butler is a theorist who has spent most of her career claiming that the prohibitive conventions of Western culture regarding certain behaviours (generally toward women) do not mean that they are "wrong". She claims that gender is not biologically fixed but is performative; a fabricated set of acts and gestures that become their own ontology and produce an effect of a deeper self. Gendered identity is performed, and each performance reinforces social norms, legitimising and making mundane artificial gender norms: in other words, making gender assumptions true through manipulation of convention.[37] Protagoras' claim that truth and reality depend on convention is an important part of twenty-first century politics both in theoretical and practical terms, and the idea is fundamental to postmodernism.

The text *Dissoi Logoi*, – Contrasting Arguments – backs up Protagoras' argument and is a key work for understanding the relativism of the sophists. It points out the differences between the standards of the Lacedaemonians and the Ionians and explains them as culturally relative. The text gives us an insight into the cultural realisations of the time, which were undoubtedly the result of Athens' changing global circumstances. I will discuss these circumstances in greater detail in another chapter, but for now what is important is to emphasise that Protagoras understood the nature of cultural diversity and used it to generate a theory of more general relativity – relativism of reality as well as convention and morality.[38] True relativism as was pioneered by Protagoras treats activity as good or bad depending upon circumstance but more than this it treats objects as one thing or another depending on circumstance with no objective or true nature.

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[36] Irwin, *Classical Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.96
[37] Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990)
[38] Wong, 'Relativism', in, Singer (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1993)

The second sophist I am interested in, Gorgias of Leontini, was more of a rhetorician than an intellectual whose ideas were generally in agreement with Protagoras' political theory. He spread sophist theory far and wide using novel and dynamic delivery but most importantly, he is credited with the invention of *Paradoxologica*; the technique of devising a message that refutes itself. He used this rhetorical device to show up the problems with philosophical reasoning, just as postmodern theorists like Foucault use linguistic analysis to dispute normalised meaning. Most famously Gorgias explained very clearly that he could never explain anything and his ability to do this (particularly when giving speeches) won him great acclaim to the extent that among Thessians, 'to orate' acquired the name 'to gorgiaise'.[39]

On What Is Not was Gorgias' seminal work and it was in this text that he asserted that there is no truth, that even if there was truth it would be unknowable and that even if there was truth and it was known it would not be communicable because we cannot understand or express truth without impressing ourselves onto it. He further claimed that since *logoi* (loosely translated as understandings in this context) are unique and cannot be transferred, bilocated or cloned communication is made logically impossible because the best anyone could ever do is evoke a similar idea in another to the one that they themselves hold.[40] Although it is possible to read *On What Is Not,* 'straight' treating Gorgias as an honestly deluded Parmenidean philosopher, it seems more likely that he was constructing an intellectual pitfall. Quite possibly, the model for *On What Is Not* was Zeno's paradoxes and he was trying to create a similar *reductiones ad absurdum* given the standing philosophical assumptions. Gorgias used a philosophical 'joke' to reveal an important problem within metaphysical theorising: that it relies on fundamental assumed beliefs and not some universal truth.[41]

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[39] Buchheim, *Gorgias von Leontini, Reden, Fragmente und Testimonien, herausgegeben mit Übersetzung und Kommentar* (Hamburg, 1989), test.35

[40] Wardy, *The Birth of Rhetoric: Gorgias, Plato and their Successors* (London: Routledge, 1996)

[41] Waterfield, *The First Philosophers: The Presocratics and the Sophists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)

The final conclusion of sophistry

Protagoras and Gorgias are remembered by history as fairly mild, conservative orators and teachers, content with using rhetoric to live within the preconceived political systems, but not all of their followers could be described this way. Thrasymachus of Chalcedon and Callicles of Athens extended sophist assumptions to their logical limits and as such, we know them as 'the radical sophists'. At this point I will just re-state that the sophists were not a school and that what they share is a very general understanding of the world based upon their shared profession and status as 'wise men'. The radical sophists had some ideas which are less easily associated with those produced by postmodern theorists, however their ideas were a development of those of their teachers and emergent aspects of postmodernity may yet utilize these ideas. The practical adoption of the ideas of Shoppenhauer and Nietzsche by the Nazis is one example of how radical relativist ideas have been practiced once already in the twentieth century. Given the volatility of postmodernism and the contemporary world, not much is beyond the realms of possibility when it comes to what, and how, old ideas can recur.

Thrasymachus reasoned that if there were no universal morality (and no natural sanctions), there was no reason that individuals should not use their talents to their advantage. He was highly critical of convention and viewed it as simply the will of the strong imposed on the rest. He thought that only a fool would willingly conform to the norms of Greek culture and be a 'just' man because, "In any and every situation, a moral person is worse off than an immoral one"[42]. He further asserted both that 'Justice is merely the advantage of the stronger party' and that 'Justice is another's good' according to Plato's *Republic,* although it should be noted at this juncture that the work is highly critical of Thrasymachus and does not treat his ideas fairly. The first claim, that justice is the advantage of the stronger party, is a legal positivist one, assuming justice to be relative to human institutions (as Protagoras claimed it was). The second claim, that justice is another's good, is what

[42] Plato, *Republic*, trans. Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 343d

Annas calls 'immoralist', as it assumes that objective justice exists, but recognises that acting justly means acting against a person's best interests.[43] If this was a claim that the real Thrasymachus made then he can be credited with taking sophistry to the next level of scepticism though he does rather depart from the fundamental idea that we cannot know anything if his philosophy is sincere and the statement is not just a rhetorical trick.

Callicles follows on from the immoralism of Thrasymachus and claims that the pursuit of one's own interests, whilst being the best course of action, is not unjust, but rather it is natural justice. Plato's Callicles states that,

> Other creatures show, as do human communities and nations, that right has been determined as follows: the superior person shall dominate the inferior person and have more than him... These people [the superior or stronger ones] act, surely, in conformity with the natural essence of right and, yes, I'd even go so far as to say that they act in conformity with natural *law*, even though they presumably contravene man-made laws.[44]

Convention and nature are invariably opposed and the rules made up by groups of humans favour the weak who constitute the majority of the species. They are framed so as to make the natural activities of strong people shameful. In *The Gorgias,* Callicles claims that, it is disabling shame rather than logic that allows Socrates to defeat Polus earlier in the argument and he asserts that an interlocutor strong and confident enough to brazen it out could not be refuted by the *elenchus*.[45] The doctrine that Callicles asserts is that "might is right", and it is a powerful example of sophistic rhetoric but also a reminder that the ideas of the sophists were not limited to their own time. Callicles' idea was echoed by Nietzsche in the nineteenth century and has become part of Western popular culture since then – it is one of the few philosophical sentiments that is almost universally understood.

Understanding relativism and the context that gave rise to it is the key to understanding the sophists. They were reacting against a culture of doubt

[43] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981)
[44] Plato, *Gorgias,* trans. Irwin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 482d
[45] Wardy, *The Birth of Rhetoric*

and finding a new way to understand the world around them. More than that, the sophists influenced the world that they were a part of through their criticisms of it and by teaching influential young men how to succeed in a world without truth and consequently without moral constraints. The key features of sophistry are a rejection of theories that rely on flawed or insubstantial evidence, a concern with specifics and detail and a generally critical cynical approach founded on the idea that all truth is relative and no evidence available to us can dispute that. I hope that by now, the reason for comparing these individuals with postmodern thinkers is clear.

TWO THEORIES COMPARED

In this chapter I will explore in greater depth some similarities between the theorising of the sophists and postmodern philosophers. My starting point will be to clarify the similarities that I have observed and in the following chapters I will go on to analyse the reasons behind these similarities, both intellectual and circumstantial. Sophistic theory has not been mindlessly parroted by postmodern theorists, and in places there are significant differences between the understandings: the radical sophists for instance recognised some form of natural law, a metanarrative, and they appear less postmodern because of this. Considering the fragmented nature of both sophistic and postmodern theory, it is not surprising that the various thinkers I am considering conflict at times. In fact this is unimportant, since the approach that the sophists and postmodernists share to asking and answering fundamental questions is the link that I am most interested in investigating.

The question

The question that these two groups of theorists separated by two and a half millennia address, is one fundamental to the conduct of human affairs. They ask why things should be as they are, and what makes them similar (other than the fact that they ask it at all) is that they reject the notion that this question can be answered. All encompassing solutions are discredited, conventional understandings are rejected, references to symbols are disallowed and empirical formulations are revealed as a philosophical fallacy because of the un-provability of the foundations of science. What this leads to is a situation where even finding the linguistic tools to pose the question is a feat, and providing an answer that can be proved and communicated is impossible. Consequently, individuals must resort to belief in ideas and, since all ideas are inherently of equal value, 'anything goes': a state known as epistemological nihilism. Bronner claims about postmodern understanding

that, "contingency is seen as undermining every philosophical foundation"[46] but his comment could be applied equally well to sophist understandings. That is why I have chosen to compare these theorists so starkly.

From these premises one can say that since all we have is belief, there are no such things as natural laws. Instead, everything that we understand to be true, fundamental things such as physical laws and transient things like human laws, are founded in convention rather than nature. The sophists' notion that this was true, that *nomos* was what held society together rather than *physis,* was disputed and temporarily dispelled by Plato but it has resurfaced in the work of postmodernists. Linda Hutcheon writes that,

> The postmodern's initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us. Even nature, postmodernists might point out, doesn't grow on trees.[47]

Garry Gutting, when writing about the beliefs of Lyotard, explains further that,

> There are no independent criteria on the basis of which we can judge ethical prescriptions to be valid or not... The absence of determinate judgement means, of course, that ethical decision lies in the realm of desire, figure, the event, the differend.[48]

It is important to understand that the basis of relativism for both the sophists and postmodern theorists is rooted in questioning assumptions. For this to develop into full blown relativism however requires the questioner to not only deny any answers that are given to his questions, but also to deny that his questions can be answered at all. What separates Plato from the sophists is the fact that he did not present a pure critical theory, but rather he tried to

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[46] Bronner, *Twentieth Century Political Theory: A Reader* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997), p.238
[47] Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London & New York: Routledge, 1989), p.2
[48] Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.329

answer the questions that his teacher Socrates asked. Plato presumed to know best in a way that the relativists, who are my concern here, never did.

The specifics

There are several specific theoretical similarities between postmodernism and sophistry that I would just like to clarify at this juncture. Some of these I have already commented on and some I will come to comment on later, but I feel this round up is necessary as it best shows why have highlighted the sophists as important tools for understanding postmodernism.

First and foremost both groups of thinkers rejected conventional wisdom even so far as to throw out scientific proofs of truth based on the flawed nature of empirical (deductive) reasoning. A sceptical approach to 'what is' is essential when thinking as either a sophist or a postmodernist. Of course they are not the only groups of thinkers to have utilised such a negative approach to understanding – the Hellenistic Sceptics for instance, especially Pyrrho, held that things were indifferent, immeasurable and indefinite and that the only available course of action was the suspension of judgement that leads to tranquillity, *ataraxia*[49] – but the similarity is significant regardless. Destructive critical relativism is used as a tool for both groups of thinkers to make their entrances and show the comparative worth of what they have to offer. The applied use of critical relativism is the task of bringing down unsupportable theories. For the sophists, undermining the pre-science of the Milesians was proof that their activity had worth, as much as any activity can have worth within a moral void, as they were serving themselves rather than constructing an untenable metanarrative. For postmodernism, critiquing aspects of the broad (and often ignorant) hegemony of modernity provides a platform from which to build a counter culture.

[49] Sharples, *Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics, an introduction to Hellenistic Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1996)

The terms differ, but the sentiments behind sophistic and postmodern attacks on convention are similar even so far as to employ shared imagery. Sophists and postmodernists alike reject the metaphor of the river, whose turbulent surface hides relentless undercurrents, because they oppose the idea of a deeper meaning behind the observable activity of individuals. If a hidden significance or universal truth exists behind every apparently free action, then it is not something that we have access to, just as we cannot see the undercurrents in a fast flowing river. There are some concerns that are apparently unique to each era, the sophists for instance did not focus on the importance of defining the self through its relationships and issues such as identity were not on their agenda. Even here though, a similarity persists because in understanding the polis, the sophists made reference to other cultures, showing us how the self-other relationship did play a part in their formulations.

The fifth century BC and the end of the twentieth century were both periods of elevated general scepticism, stemming apparently from a periodic theological decline. The forms for communication (of new ideas and otherwise) particular to these periods were notably relativistic: I refer of course to the 'birth of rhetoric' in the Ancient World, and the growth of the 'culture of spin' in contemporary times.

Applying this

Understanding that answers cannot be yielded by any means accessible to us is one thing that many theorists have shared throughout history but these same theorists have not all agreed on what this means in practical terms. Pure plurality, choice above all else, is only a theory, and its application is where politics becomes involved. Politically, the sophists are shown to us by Plato as using their skills with rhetoric to become wealthy and influential through teaching their charges about the workings of power. Though it is biased, his account shows that because they saw every idea as relative, the

sophists taught how to make political gains by convincing others of the (false) value of ideas that benefited oneself over others.

From our current perspective theorists like Lyotard and Foulcault are not seen as corruptors of those who study them, teaching people how to be systematic manipulators of belief for their own personal gain. This could be because of a lack of opportunity in the modern world due to structural safeguards that now exist, or some sort of natural intellectual resistance we have developed. Perhaps, it could be because our morality has evolved past the point where our short sightedness might lead us to use philosophy the way we once did (though observation of the world around us seems not to lend strength to this idea). Alternatively, perhaps we are blind to the way that students of the postmodern abuse the modern world either because we are too close to our subject to observe it objectively or because we tend to look in the wrong place. Evidence of such abuse is found in the political philosophy of Hitler's National Socialism for instance. Marxist philosopher Georg Lukacs claimed that Nazi ideology and practice was derived from the philosophy of Jacobi, Hamann, Schelling, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Dilthey, Scheler, Jaspers, and Heidegger. He claims that these philosophers attacked reason, all promoted irrationality, and hence they all prepared the way for Hitler. Although this ideologically biased interpretation is perhaps more indicative of the poverty of marxist philosophy under Stalin, it does still contain more than just a grain of truth regarding the source of Nazi ideology.[50]

We believe that postmodern theorists engage in dialectic rather than rhetoric, revealing the truth through an impartial means that benefits all parties rather than the self-serving and self-promoting argument used by the sophists. That said are we truly so naïve as to assume that these theorists are not pursuing their own personal agendas? It is not exclusively intellectual altruism that leads to theorists forming postmodern pearls of wisdom. The motivations for forming novel political theory are grounded in material needs for the research grants that only go to theorists who find something new to say, and in human

[50] Lukacs, *The Destruction of Reason*, trans. Palmer (London: Merlin Press, 1980)

needs such as the ego boosts that fame or professional respect can provide. Furthermore, postmodern theorists produce nothing of material worth and make a living by selling their ideas: an activity that a bitter young man whose mentor had just been executed by the state might well lash out at in critical terms. Contemporary society as a whole could simply not be aware of the extent to which our theorists are misleading us, and as yet, a modern day Plato has not emerged to show us 'the truth'.

A further, more grounded, explanation for the discrepancy between the applied motivations of the two sets of thinkers is one of interpretation. Whilst it is true that temporal circumstances have changed, influencing how people would go about their enquiries as well as what they would find and how they would deal with their results, the sophists may have been treated remarkably similarly to postmodern theorists by their society. Our understanding of the sophists is focussed through the somewhat biased (Platonist) lens of history, and of course what we perceive is not necessarily the picture we were intended to receive, let alone an accurate presentation of the facts (as much as they themselves can exist). We must be careful to allow for misunderstanding that can be attributed to problems of communication, translation (both temporal and linguistic) and natural uncertainty of what is.

Perhaps supporting evidence is found in practical forms. Catherine Osborne describes the sophists as spin-doctors, hoodwinking the poor and milking the rich.[51] This puts me in mind of a quote from Blackadder the Third, where the devious butler explains social order as he sees it: "Toffs at the top, plebs at the bottom, and me in the middle making a fat pile of cash out of both of them!" It also however makes me think of the political advisors who now play such an important role in politics. Few commentators would argue that the business of winning elections is something other than convincing the masses how to vote, and getting the wealthy to fund you in this goal. This interpretation leads to some negativity towards the sophists, but their role, like that of spin-doctors, is an important one in democratic systems. Plato, to my

[51] Osborne, *Presocratic Philosophy: A very short introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

mind, never fully disproved the importance of *arête* (skill) with his argument that the best ruler is a moral one, since according even to his own argument the best ruler is both moral and skilful. The morality of the sophists may have been questionable but their skill was not. Sophist skills, doctrines and understandings have a role to play, and more than just that of the other that helps define the self of post-socratic society. Most clearly, this is exhibited is through the machinations of political aides in both these and many other epochs, who engage in the necessary business of convincing people.

Wording the theory

An interesting point of comparison between sophistic and postmodern theory is the delivery method used to justify and spread the theories. Typical critical-forms associated with the two movements in question reveal a parallel that may be of significance and that is the interesting form. Parody is often considered central to postmodernism and it can easily (and accurately) be likened to the *paradoxologica* used by the sophists. Both criticise convention through a form of light-hearted rhetoric that reveals how silly the convention in question is. They are used to engage with history and lead the audience to re-evaluate their understanding of it. Dominic LaCapra wrote the following in reference to the postmodern utility of pastiche, but he could equally have been writing them about typical sophistic device,

> a certain use of irony and parody may play a role both in the critique of ideology and in the anticipation of a policy wherein commitment does not exclude but accompanies an ability to achieve critical distance on one's deepest commitments and desires.[52]

I believe that there is more to the similarities that I have observed than pure coincidence. Linguistic devices are important analytical tools, and the critical theorists that I am considering here have recognised this regardless of their eras. Geoffrey Harpham takes a different view to me when he claims that the

[52] LaCapra, *History Politics and the Novel* (Ithica & New York: Cornell University Press, 1978), p.128

'linguistic turn' is a uniquely self-defeating problem of twentieth century thinking. He explains why "nothing meaningful... can be said about language as such, both because language 'as such' is not available for direct observation and because the features, aspects, characteristics, and qualities that can be attributed to language approach the infinite"[53]. He takes issue with the analysis of Derrida, Wittgenstein, Chomsky, Gramsci and Hume to name just a few, and offers a deep criticism of the method of modern and postmodern philosophy. To Harpham, linguistic analysis is a contemporary obsession that has shaped the development of all theory connected to it.[54] The important sentiment here is that the form (in this case language) influences the content (the theory) and although I do not agree with Harpham's claims that linguistic obsession is something new and potentially worthless, I do agree that the wording of sophistic and postmodern theories influenced (and was influenced by) their nature.

Contemporary forms bear a resemblance to Ancient ones in more than just the field of political theory. The 'culture of spin' that seems to be a part of contemporary practical politics bears similarities to the way that politics was practiced in Ancient Greece. The image of a politician and the convincingness of his rhetoric are what determine how successful he is, though arguably this has been the case throughout history: Alexander the Great, Julius Ceaser and Adolf Hitler were all great demagogues and media managers for instance. That the form no longer requires any content, or that celebrity is its own gratuitous reward, is evidence of postmodernism in the world around us. In the contemporary world, just as in Ancient Greece, we are entertained by novel rhetoric to the extent that evidence and dialectic no longer concern us as much as (according to modernist moral standards) they should.

It is naïve to claim that only postmodernists and sophists are concerned with language, as the relationship between language and knowledge is of central

[53] Harpham, *Language Alone: The Critical Fetish of Modernity* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), p.ix
[54] Harpham, *Language Alone*

philosophical importance. Plato articulated this in his *Cratylus* but it is an idea that has recurred countless times. "Early in its development, a philosophical tradition will consider the nature of language, for language is, after all, the medium of philosophical expression. To be truly philosophical, inquiry must have at least a rudimentary theory between the relationship between words and non-linguistic reality."[55]

Similar but different

To my mind it is clear that there are similarities (even if they are non exclusive similarities) between the theories of the sophists and postmodern thinkers. These similarities exist in form and method: in what the theorists said and how they said it. I will expand on the reasons for these similarities, both structural and intellectual, in later chapters.

The following sentiment came from a book on Descartes but it holds true for everything that I have been exploring in this chapter.

> Some years ago, an anthropologist friend told me something of what it is like to do field work. When one enters a new community, she said, it is all very alien, an alien language, alien customs, alien traditions. After a while things change; the language and customs become familiar, and the once-alien community is just like home. The final stage comes when the similarities and differences come into focus, when one recognises what ones subjects share with us, while at the same time appreciating the genuine differences there are between them and us. The case is similar for the history of philosophy. We cannot ignore the ways in which past thinkers are involved in projects similar to ours, and the ways in which we can learn from what they have written, how it can contribute to our search for philosophical enlightenment. At the same time, we cannot ignore the ways in which they differ from us, the way in which their programs differ from ours, the way in which they ask different questions and make different assumptions.[56]

[55] Kasulis, 'Reference and symbol in Plato's Cratylus and Kuukai's Shojijissogi', in *Philosophy East and West,* vol. 32:4 (1982), p.393
[56] Garber, *Descartes Embodied: Reading Cartesian philosophy through Cartesian Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.30

It is important to see both the similarities between ideas of the present and the past, and the differences. I will say again that I do not simply believe that postmodernism is sophistry 'rehashed' but perhaps it is the modern equivalent.

On the subject of similar yet different interpretations I would like to just briefly talk about Socrates. It may have occurred to the astute reader already that much of the similarity I have observed is in relation to theorists' willingness to ask questions and defy the dictates of conventional morality (challenge *nomoi*). Socrates was of course famous for asking questions too, but the reason that he is not the same as the sophists or postmodernists was because he used the process of questioning to guide people he engaged with toward his conclusion. Socrates' *elenchos* exposed falsehoods and inconsistencies within the beliefs of his interlocutors and he used their confusion to discover stable moral definitions rather than flimsy inherited or assumed bases for moral understanding. The aim was to uncover a universal true morality and support this truth through elentic investigation with every human being who bothered to address it.[57] The key difference between Socrates and the sophists or postmodernists that I am most interested in is of course the fact that Socrates thinks that answers are available to him. Janet Coleman writes,

> There is an important contrast between the Socratic position and that of either of the two Sophists, Protagoras or Gorgias. For both Sophists, how things 'really' are is not discoverable by inquiry and argument. For them philosophical activity simply does not get at *the* truth; for Gorgias it gets at no truth at all but at more or less good arguments and for Protagoras it gets at as many truths as there are men, culturally situated, who experience the world of appearances.[58]

Relativism, the concept of doubting absolutes and higher truths, is a timeless concept that has resurfaced and, to my mind, this must have happened for a

[57] Klosko, 'Rational Persuasion in Plato's Political Theory' *History of Political Thought* 7 (1986), pp.15-31

[58] Coleman, *A History of Political Thought: From Ancient Greece to Early Christianity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p.48

reason. Perhaps the failure of empirically lacking structuralist assertions, not dissimilar to the unscientific metaphysical models produced by the Milesian School of presocratics, was the trigger but it is telling that the critical trend has again blossomed. Maybe an epoch of human history is ending, just as happened in Ancient Greece when Plato's philosophy fundamentally redirected mankind's historic course, or perhaps it is a more limited natural (even defensive) human reaction to the perceived failure of religion or science to support its absolute answers. The resurgence of relativism could be in no way connected to the ideas of ancient Greece; certainly the context is different, meaning a different process for the development of the idea not to mention its application, but to my mind the two epochs are different but the same. I think that the postmodernism is part of a process, and I am fascinated to see where it leads this time around.

THE INTELLECTUAL BACKDROP TO POSTMODERNISM

Several important theorists laid theoretical foundations that allowed the sophists and postmodern thinkers to reach their conclusions. I have already mentioned the role that various theorists played in the ancient world, but in this chapter I will be making a more detailed case study of two contemporary philosophers who were fundamental to the development of postmodern political theory. I will be looking at Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Nietzsche and explaining where they fit into the development of the theory. These philosophers were not of course the only intellectual background to postmodernism and the first part of the chapter will concern itself with setting out the context for their philosophising in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries respectively.

I have chosen to look in detail at just two theorists but an expanded study could look in detail at the work of many other theorists including Rousseau, Hegel and Marx. I have deliberately set aside the philosophy of Marx and Engels because although I am aware of its value and its influence on the contemporary world, and although I agree with the sentiment that "Marxism is the most important criticism of the dominant Western form of economic modernity, capitalism"[59], I none the less categorise the results of their work as more of a material socio-economic background to the work of the sophists than an intellectual one. I will make comparisons to my ancient parallel, but primarily this chapter is concerned with setting the intellectual scene that was responsible for the development of postmodernism in the late twentieth century.

[59] Cahoone, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, p.91

The basis for critical theory

Many philosophers have played a part in the development of postmodernism. Some have played their role by directly critiquing modernity whilst others have tried to reinforce modernism and through their failings, or in response to their successes have encouraged further epistemological rebellion. It is difficult to establish a starting point for the theory that I am interested in because of the fundamental nature of the ideas involved but perhaps through looking at what they rejected this can be achieved.

The cult of modernity was conceived in the Enlightenment. Rene Descartes, writing in the 17th Century, attempted to use reason to build a metaphysical model of understanding from base principles. He engaged in perhaps the first phenomenological inquiry by problematising the context of all understanding. Descartes began his work by reducing certainty to a single concept: *Cogito Ergo Sum,* I think, therefore I am. He made an almost protagorean claim in his first meditation that,

> All that up to the present time I have accepted as most true and certain I have learned either from the senses of through the senses; but it is sometimes proved to me that the senses are deceptive, and it is wiser not to trust entirely to any thing by which we have once been deceived.[60]

Descartes goes on to recognise that his beliefs are really just opinions that he has more reason to believe in than to deny: a realization that he does not have access to universal truths. He however reacts differently to these realizations than the sophists did before him and postmodernists would do in his wake. "Descartes sought an absolute certain foundation from which he could prove the existence of god, the proper method of science, and the existence of the material world, thereby harmonising theology and the new science"[61]. The starting point for this certainty that Descartes identified was consciousness, the only thing he knew to be true and real, although his critics

[60] Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), trans. Haldane and Ross, in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes,* vol.I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p.145
[61] Cahoone, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, p.29

doubt even this since he does not (even cannot) prove that his own consciousness exists. The claim that, "...there is nothing which is easier for me to know than my mind..."[62] may be true, but it does not necessarily follow that one can even know ones own mind.

I do not see the need to discuss the later discourses because I have already made my point. The work of Descartes foreshadows that of postmodernism at the same time as it lays the foundations for modern ways of thinking. Understanding the problems of Cartesian metaphysics leads to an understanding of the failure of science and the reasons for radical critical theory: everything we believe to be true is founded on the philosophy of a man who suffered from human fallibility. In a way I think that this attests to the idea that a radical critical theory was intellectually inevitable at some point. Postmodernism is the yin to the yang of foundationalism – the sort of theorising that Descartes and Plato both engaged in that attempts to establish foundations of knowledge and judgement.

Descartes stands for something artificial. He is credited with separating first philosophy and natural philosophy, or as we now call them philosophy and science.[63] He worked toward establishing a universal rational-scientific methodology based around his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, and in doing so helped to establish the framework of modernity that the postmodernists so ardently reject. Another philosopher who was involved intimately with this process was Michel de Montaigne who paved the way for enlightenment understandings about cultural relativism by asking over and over again "what do I know?"

Like Descartes, Montaigne started from sceptical principles – disbelieving our access to knowledge – and went on to develop a theory that advocated modernist scientific ones. It is plausible to claim that radical doubt was necessary for the new sort of certainty based on scientific principles. The

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[62] Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy,* p.157
[63] Garber, *Descartes Embodies: Reading Cartesian Philosophy Through Cartesian Science* (Chicago: Cambridge University Press, 2001)

good scientist after all, is the one willing to test all assumptions, to challenge all traditional opinion, to get closer to the truth. The problem with this analysis is not that ultimate truth, such as was claimed by religious thinkers, is unattainable by scientists, but that we sometimes forget this limitation. Montaigne best phrased this sentiment when he claimed that, "there is a plague on man, the opinion that he knows something"[64].

I have been a little harsh on Montaigne in setting him alongside Descartes as commentators often comment on his reasonable use of reason, especially when compared to the latter. The Cartesian ideology of Reason fuelled the relentless Juggernaut of Science that remains challenged only by postmodernism would likely have appalled Montaigne. He stood for something more human and if Europe had adopted his pattern of understanding perhaps rationalization to the extreme that gave birth to radical critical theory might not have occurred. None the less both Montaigne and Descartes used scepticism to clear the path for reason and religion. The apparent failings of both of these structures of understanding in the late twentieth century is something that I believe is intrinsically linked to the rebirth of relativism in the work of the sophists.

One final theorist to note when discussing the backdrop to (pre-) postmodern theorising is Georg Hegel whose work constitutes an integral part of the fabric of modern thought. Reading Hegels foundation concepts is similar to reading the origin theories of the presocratic philosophers who I discussed earlier. In the start there is nothing but *Geist* (Mind or Spirit) containing but one idea, that of existence or being. From one idea all others are deduced and eventually the Mind transforms into its opposite, matter in an event equivalent to the Big Bang as we now understand it. From this start, all of human history represents the unfolding, or growing, of the original Mind.[65] The idea is poetic and perhaps rather indebted to Anaximander's theory that everything formed from *Apieron,* the infinite. Clearly Hegel utilises a more human understanding but his theory probably played a very similar role to that of the presocratics in

[64] Montaigne, *The Essays of Michel Montaigne,* trans. Screech (London: Penguin Press, 1991), p.543
[65] Adams and Dyson, *Fifty Major Political Thinkers* (London & New York: Routledge, 2003)

framing the rise of postmodernism. Thinkers like Descartes, Hegel and Montaigne all represent something that postmodernism kicked away from, reacted against and at least in part, defined itself through opposition to.

Immanuel Kant

A theorist who I believe played an important role in setting the context for relativist political philosophy is Immanuel Kant. His role was something akin to that of Parmenides of Elea in my ancient parallel because of his critical interest in the sciences. I also think his opinion about knowledge is familiar: he claimed that, "...experience does indeed teach me what exists and what it is like, but never that it must necessarily be so and not otherwise. Therefore it can never teach me the nature of things in themselves."[66] Like so many of the theorists that I am considering, Kant struggled with questions about how he could know anything and this doubt must have contributed to the theory that he conceived. "In its very conception, metaphysics involves a genuine extension of human cognition beyond what is known through experience."[67] Like so many theorists Kant ended up turning on convention when he realised that he did not have access to universal truths.

Kant was the modern master of critical theorising and his work serves as the outline for understanding 'the politics of critique'.[68] The sophistication of critical postmodernism would not be possible without the guidelines of Kantian critique, but more than this, Kant played a crucial role in directing his critical theory and showing the fallibility of the totems of modernity. His work represents a milestone in the history of intellectualism and although what he said is often misunderstood because of its complexity, I am spending time dealing with him because,

[66] Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will be Able to Present Itself as Science,* trans. Zoller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), §14, p.101
[67] Kant, *Prolegomena,* trans. Zoller, 'Overview' p.28
[68] Hutchings, *Kant Critique and Politics* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996)

> ... the critical discourses, from Kant onwards, can all be read as lapsing back into precritical alternatives. In the works of Kant, Habermas and Ardent, in particular, critique seems in constant danger of reverting either to an authoritarian dogmatism, in which the philosopher holds the key to judgement, or to a radical scepticism in which judgement becomes impossible.[69]

Critique was reborn in Kant's work at the same time as it was condemned, and although he made it possible for there to be useful criticisms, in doing so he showed the fallacy of techniques that did not meet his standards. Much post-Kanitan theory does not dare be critical for fear of being interpreted as either self-serving dogmatic rhetoric, or as bland description too passive to pass judgements with authority.

The dilemma is an important one to consider in conjunction with postmodernism and in conjunction with the sophistry of Ancient Athens. In the Athenian context I believe that the two perils of critique detailed by Kant were exemplified by the theories put forward by Plato (who believed that the philosopher held the key to judgement) and the sophists (who believed that judgement was impossible). Postmodern theory is richer for its understanding of these problematic dynamics of criticism. Thanks to Kant, postmodernists have realised that modernity cannot be attacked with anything more than the opinions of those who oppose it. Of course they value these opinions more than Kant did based upon their belief that truth is unattainable.

Postmodernism embraces the problem that Kant outlined and is not concerned that reason demands critique is either descriptive or self-serving. Justification is something that the modern, rational world must deal with and it has no place in the opinion-oriented realm of the postmodern. Although Kant refused to be drawn to dogmatic or sceptical conclusions, Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard and their contemporaries utilise arguments that should invalidate their criticisms according to Kant. Their answer to his criticism of their critiques is simply that they claim no allegiance to his structured rule system, which they see as a product of the modern world and a part of the very modern method

[69] Hutchings, *Kant Critique and Politics*, p.3

that they are criticising. In Athens, Parmenides and the sophists showed the same lack of respect toward the rules of the Milesians. What they had to say fundamentally undermined the existing system of understanding so any criticisms levelled at them from within that system were logically made null and void.

Kant's work deserves more attention than a passing mention since it does represent an important stage in the development of postmodern theory, even if postmodernists rather ironically dispute the notion of development. Kant's criticism of empirical reasoning is particularly interesting because he did not reject modern science despite the threat that he saw it posing to morality and autonomy. What he did think, was that people should trust themselves and their own judgements more: for him the motto of enlightenment was "*Sapere aude!*" (literally meaning 'dare to be wise') and he urged people to, "Have courage and use your own understanding!"[70] This classical republican idea (perhaps borrowed from Ancient Greece or Rome) that autonomy is central to human completion was the reason that Kant challenged science, morality and religion as social crutches.

Immaturity is easy according to Kant, and we do not learn to trust ourselves because we are lazy as well as being scared of being autonomous and free-thinking. As part of his own enlightenment Kant was critical of many facets of life around him and he problematised the mundane in a social context (just as modern phenomonologists do) but also in a scientific context. Kant's first published work, *Thoughts on the True Estimation of Living Forces,* questioned the nature and method of metaphysics in the context of breaking mathematical physics and initiated "a fundamental philosophical reconsideration of Newtonian physics"[71]. In essence, what Kant did, like Parmenides long before him, was dispute conventional social and scientific assumptions and pave the way for future theorists to go a step further and dispute convention altogether.

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[70] Kant, 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' in, Reiss (ed.) *Kant's Political Writings,* trans. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p.54

[71] Friedman, *Kant and the Exact Science* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p.xi

Friedrich Nietzsche

The philosopher who I consider perhaps the most important intellectual facilitator of postmodernism was Friedrich Nietzsche and perhaps the reason for his importance was that he was a classicist before he was a philosopher. Nietzsche understood the pre-history of ideas and drew heavily on classics when he developed his own theory. He occupies an interesting position in my portrait of relativist political theory because whilst he may or may not have been the first postmodernist (something that I will go on to discuss), he certainly influenced postmodernism through his formulations about the modern world, based upon his understanding of the Ancient one.

Just as Kant had hoped, the enlightenment forwarded the cause of autonomy and allowed bourgeois individuals to become self-sufficient. Of course the proletariat paid for this with dependency and alienation according to Marx, but their sacrifice did lead to change not entirely unlike, though far more subtle, than that which Marxism predicted.

> ...separation and self-sufficiency, which, considered from the standpoint of philosophy of history, paved the way for emancipation from age-old dependencies, were experienced at the same time as abstraction and alienation from the totality of an ethical context of life. Once religion had been the unbreakable seal upon this totality; it is not by chance that this seal has been broken.[72]

Modernity undermined enlightenment and religious values, leading Nietzsche to assert that 'God is dead'. I think that this void of certainty is in part what allowed for the rebirth of relativism. One cannot be a relativist if one has faith or a belief in dogma but when that faith wanes it leads to the asking of unanswerable questions about the nature of things. If nothing else it seems like more than pure chance that the philosophical musings of the sophists and postmodernists both occur in atheising (if not fully atheist) social climes.

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[72] Habermas, 'The Entry into Postmodernity: Nietzsche as a Turning Point', *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Lawrence (Cornwall: Polity Press, 1987), pp.83-4

The claim that 'God is dead' is more than a simple statement of atheism. Nietzsche was asserting that modernity is on the verge of collapsing in on itself because "the highest values have devalued themselves."[73] The highest values that he means are Platonic or Christian ideals that encourage community. It is not entirely clear whether his assertion that "Morality in Europe today is herd animal mentality"[74] refers to these ideals or to what is left in their wake and perhaps the best interpretation is something of a compromise: the development of herd mentality is encouraged by the ideals of modernity if not consciously then as a result of how the project is bound to pan out. Robert Pippin, commentating on Nietzsche's effect on the modernity problem, aptly summarises the philosopher's opinion that there is something historically distinctive about modernity:

> His claim is that we live in an age in which there are numerous 'signs' revealing (to those with eyes to see) that this entire post-Platonic project has begun to collapse under the weight of the dilemmas and *aporiai* it created for itself, to terminate in an anomic, directionless "herd society," and most fundamentally in an experience of worthlessness and enervation Nietzsche calls 'nihilism' or 'the radical repudiation of value, meaning and desirability'.[75]

The fact that Nietzsche envisaged the quite postmodern growth of nihilism does not necessarily make him a postmodernist, just as me agreeing that base economic concerns influence social superstructures does not make me a Marxist. Nietzsche fought against the outcome and proposed a politics for the future: the *Ubermensch* or Supermen who should be strong, cruel and undemocratic. The *Ubermensch* put me in mind of the unjust man that Thrasymachus advocated or the truly just man that Callicles talked about. They should be leaders who are in touch with their true nature and instincts, disciplined and able to make sacrifices but ultimately autonomous unlike the weak modern man who plays it safe and takes refuge in the crowd. The

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[73] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power,* trans. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), p.9
[74] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil,* trans. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966), p.115
[75] Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture* (Cornwall: Blackwell, 1991), pp.82-3

influence of Kant is clear: man must awake from his immaturity and become autonomous, something that can only be achieved through questioning the world around and perhaps more importantly criticising it. In Kanitan terms Nietzsche may appear as a dogmatist but perhaps this understanding is in part due to the application and corruption of Nietzsche's theory long after his death as a foundation for the Third Reich. Heidegger's understanding of Nietzsche is doubtless better founded, and I defer to his assertion that Nietzsche leads the counter movement to nihilism as an artist-philosopher.[76]

In a way it is not important how Nietzsche's response to nihilism is understood; the very fact that he had one is enough. Like Marx, he saw a danger to society and reacted by offering a solution, a solution that has since his time been twisted and turned to many an application. To my mind this sets him apart from contemporary postmodernists who embrace the change that nihilism offers and reject the very notion that society can be 'saved'. The analyst Clayton Koelb, when speculating about whether Nietzsche was actually a postmodernist or not, summarises the problem well: "Certainly Nietzsche is critical of the science and philosophy of his day, casting doubt on their efforts at self-legitimation, but does not his work as a whole aim toward the creation of its own metanarrative and thus its own version of modernism?"[77]. Contra to this viewpoint one might argue that Nietzsche's work may at times be prescriptive, but that it refuses to be defined by a single progressive story: his work, like that of the Ancient Greek thinkers he admired, is "superficial – out of profoundity."[78]

Perhaps the most compelling evidence that supports claims that Nietzsche was a postmodernist is found in his 'perspectivism'. Christianity instilled in Western minds a love of truth and a consequence of this has been the growth of science. Science has undermined the concept of God and in doing so has disrupted the underlying metaphysics of meaning: without God there is no

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[76] Heidegger, *Nietzsche,* volume 1: *The Will to Power as Art* (New York & London: Harper & Row, 1979)
[77] Koelb (ed.), *Nietzsche as Postmodernist: essays pro and contra* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp.5-6
[78] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* trans. Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)

absolute truth and no single belief has any inherent worth over all other beliefs. All truth is relative (though the problem with this statement is that it must itself be a relative truth) and the only truth is that there is no one truth: truth is particularised not universal. This takes us right back to where the sophists left off; all we have access to is belief and we should use this to advance ourselves.[79]

Babette Babich makes a good case for understanding the postmodern as post-Nietzsche. In other words Nietzsche was a part of the matrix of modernity who contributed to the growth of postmodernism but cannot himself be understood as a postmodernist. The particular contribution that she emphasises is Nietzsche's musings on the meaning of the post-enlightenment subject: the postmodern humanist.[80] Babich backs up this assertion by pointing to the work of Charles Jencks who finds Nietzsche to be a paradigm of modernity. He claims that Nietzsche, Einstein and Freud represent core proponents of the modern world and that postmodernism is their ideas taken to extremes; to the point of failure, which becomes a failure of modernity.[81]

Finding an answer to the question of how Nietzsche and postmodernism relate to one another is intellectual quicksand. Babich concludes that,

> A reflection on the relevance of Nietzsche to the postmodern condition of thought is a reflection on the relevance of the question of the question, the ability to question, and to think. This reflection can begin in a time after the prize of thought, the illusion of the accession to the ultimate object, has been dismantled. The broken shards of the illusion, the shattered mirror of representation, offer metonymic conduction which lines primacy, fulfilment, or truth, or on the left, the side of failure, incompletion, or illusion, and leads, as a tentative question that asks where it does not know what it will find, to the inevitable shifting of the signifier, and the ambiguity of the Real that impossibly circumscribes the human condition.[82]

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[79] Adams & Dyson, *Fifty Major Political Thinkers* (London & New York: Routledge, 2003)
[80] Babich, 'Nietzsche and the Condition of Postmodern Thought', in Koelb (ed.), *Nietzsche as Postmodernist: essays pro and contra*
[81] Jencks, *What is Postmodernism?* (London: Academy Editions, 1987)
[82] Babich, 'Nietzsche and the Condition of Postmodern Thought', in Koelb (ed.), *Nietzsche as Postmodernist: essays pro and contra,* p.266

To my mind this is evidence that the problem is ultimately unsolvable. Nietzsche and postmodernism are related, but finding the exact nature of that relationship is not something that any amount of analysis can establish. One perspective is that Nietzsche's ideas were pre-modern, another is that they were highly modern, and another is that they were postmodern. His work has a lot of room for interpretation, "...and this alone makes him attractive for postmodern interpretation and interpretation as a postmodernist."[83] Perhaps it is more of a reflection on postmodernism that it finds influence in historic works as some kind of justification after the event. If this is the case then similarities with the works of the sophists may too be coincidental but at the same time useful to back up the theory. I am not fond of this idea because it gives postmodernism too much credit as being intellectually independent and original (something that any true postmodernist should reject on the basis of all understanding being reliant on context). To my mind postmodernists have reinterpreted Nietzsche and parodied his ideas, making him an important part of their context and composition.

[83] Solomon, 'Nietzsche, Postmodernism and Resentment', in Koelb (ed.), *Nietzsche as Postmodernist: essays pro and contra*, p.271

THE LAST THEORY

Having gone some way toward setting the intellectual backdrop to postmodernism I now want to explore the material reasons behind the theory. There is a feeling now that the world is entering a new age, and whilst opinion is divided on when this change occurred and what the world is becoming, the notion of change is almost universal. How the changing world has interacted with postmodern ideas will be my focus and I will try to clarify the relationship. To do this I will first detail what I believe to be the important domestic and international circumstances that have surrounded and made change possible. Among these circumstances I will detail my base analysis regarding globalization, which will allow me to discuss its relationship to postmodern political theory in following sections. I am also keen to talk in this chapter about the problems of labelling this new era that we seem to share a belief in as something particularly new.

The changed contemporary world

It is no fairer to say that every theorist now believes that the world has changed than it would be to claim that every theorist is a postmodernist, but just as academics now must acknowledge the notion of postmodernism even if they dispute it, they must recognise that structures and ideas are not what they were fifty years ago. Modern technological advances have forever changed the human condition politically and socially, and new tools of understanding are required to cope with this.

After the Second World War, British historian Arnold Toynbee asserted that mankind had entered the fourth and final phase of western history, the "postmodern" phase, which would be characterised by irrationalism and

angst.[84] More famously, Francis Fukuyama claimed in 1989 that history had ended, that the ideas of the West had triumphed and that no further ideological progress would be made.[85] These two thinkers were not alone in seeing the second half of the twentieth century as a turning point of human history based on material changes, and although their ideas were not universally accepted, it became clear that the end of the Second World War and the Cold War were events that would forever change conventional political understandings. On the surface it may have appeared that only international relations would have to be understood in different terms, but due to the interlinked nature of all exchanges of power, the effects on the domestic sphere were bound to be noteworthy. I believe that proofs of this unilateral change are all too clear to be ignored.

As well as Fukuyama's understanding about what the end of the Cold War would mean, there were two other important theories about what would happen to the world: Huntington's idea that the clash of civilizations and human conflict in general were inevitable, and Held and Falk's understanding that a global civil society or a cosmopolitan democracy would emerge. These fresh approaches would break apart the inter-paradigm debate, an ideological conflict within the discipline that had so long allowed realism to dominate the theory and practice of international relations, so to an extent their very presence (rather than their truthfulness) was important for the evolution of our political understanding.[86] With hindsight perhaps we can see elements of truth in all three of these theories since the contemporary world is perhaps quite changed from the one we used to know and yet it is still rife with conflict.

I will be focussing on the idea of the end of history in this section of the essay because I think that the distinction between epochs is best marked by that phrase. I do not fully believe that we now exist in the tail end of human civilization, playing out the inevitable final reprise of liberal-capitalism, but I do

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[84] Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987)
[85] Frances Fukuyama, 'The End of History?' *The National Interest,* 16 (1989)
[86] Smith, 'New Approaches to International Theory', in, Baylis & Smith (eds.), *The Globalization of World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)

think that we are entering a new age and the end of history that Fukuyama detailed is a landmark worth recognising. I particularly like Zbigniew Brezinski's opinion on this period, which is that we are 'between two ages', the past age of nation states and an unknown future age, although I would expand this idea a little and say that we are between an age of convention and something more radical in socio-cultural, as well as geo-political terms.[87]

The new age where conventional political understandings have been revoked is fundamentally linked with the theory of postmodernism, indeed it could even be called the practice of it. When talking about the period of transition following the end of history I believe we are talking about the postmodern era as much as it exists in definable temporal terms. When exactly the world became postmodern is not really important or as simple as a single date or event, though in order to share an understanding of when we are talking about I will say that to my mind the ideas were born of the late 1960s but became 'real' in the late 1980s; the collapse of the former world order that was the Cold War having resulted in an ideological and organizational vacuum that was filled by postmodernism. I agree (conditionally) with what Barry Smart says, even though he made the claim a decade before I would perhaps have agreed with it,

> The idea that we are living in new times is interesting, pervasive, if not seductive, particularly in a crucial context where there has been, for some time now, a cult of the new, a social and economic context in which innovation and novelty have been promoted, their virtues extolled, often through implied associations with ideas of progress and/or development. Moreover, on a number of fronts there do appear to be signs of significant forms of change permeating social, economic, political and cultural institutions and practices. Such signs have undoubtedly lent credence to the idea of new times.[88]

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[87] Garnett, 'States, State-centric Perspectives and Interdependence theory', section 1, chapter 2 of Baylis & Rengger (ed.), *Dilemmas of World Politics: International Issues in a Changing World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992)

[88] Smart, *Postmodernity: Key Ideas* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.14

When the Athenian Empire defeated Persia in the Cyprus campaign of 450-49 BC, crushing the fleet of Phoenician and Cilician ships, it allowed Pericles to negotiate an end to the war. The exact details of the peace (known as the peace of Callias) are unclear and, although it represented a cessation of hostilities, it does seem unlikely that Athens would have deliberately made peace with the 'other' whose threatening nature justified her empire unless circumstance forced the resolution. Regardless, the period must have been as historic as the end of the Cold War and the people who had known war with Persia for so long must have imagined that the peace (if it lasted) would usher in a new world era – an impression that would have been important regardless of the actual course that events took. The way that peace came about was interesting because it involved factors both internal and external to Athens. Firstly the death of the powerful Athenian statesman Cimon, who had been a driving force behind the war, meant that Pericles could negotiate with the support of Athens, and secondly, the victory in Cition meant that the Great King was disposed to negotiate from the Persian side.[89] The whole period of détente, although it did not result in either side crumbling as happened to the USSR in the late 1980s, was a turning point in history that definitely had an effect on the philosophical, political and social formulations that followed immediately after it.

Of the theories intended to understand the post Cold War world mentioned earlier, the one that best explains what happened next in Ancient Greece is Huntingdon's idea that political (and indeed military) strife is part of the human condition. Athens and Sparta of course went to war with one another after the peace with Persia was secured, and the conflict continued showing perhaps that although the enemy's name may change, we do not. Perhaps the contemporary War on Terror is another example of this, proving that whilst the method and tools may change, humanity's attitude endures and will lead to conflict and adversary following every spell of peace no matter what new age or state of enlightenment we claim to be in. Theoretical evidence to support this is found when one expands, to the national level, the postmodern

[89] Bury, *A History of Greece to the Death of Alexander*

idea that self is reflexive, because as a polis, Athens was defined in opposition to the other of her enemies.

The global world

The approach offered forward by some of the most reasonable and forward thinking theorists writing about the global world is not one that results in war and it is justified with analysis of the contemporary world rather than reference back to history. The birth of a global civil society in the late twentieth century has been facilitated by modern technology and political understandings relevant to a changing world where, for instance, fundamental principles of international security have changed and are continuing to change. New models of understanding global relations have grown in the gulf left by traditional realist and idealist theories and the most significant of these is the idea of globalization. Like postmodernism, it is a pseudo-pop culture term that is over used and understood by too few, and that is why this essay will now focus in on the term and try to define what exactly it means and why it is relevant to this discussion.

There is no simple answer to what globalization is but this does not prevent it from being an important concept. Prominent theorists in this field David Held and Anthony McGrew start one of their most recent books on globalization with a sentiment that sums up why I have decided to include study of the phenomenon in this essay.

> Globalization is an idea whose time has come. From obscure origins in French and American writings of the 1960s, the concept of globalization finds expression today in all the world's major languages. Yet, it lacks precise definition. Indeed, globalization is in danger of becoming, if it has not already become, the cliché of our times: the big idea which encompasses everything from global financial markets to the Internet but which delivers little substantive insight into the contemporary human condition.[90]

[90] Held, McGrew, Goldblatt & Perraton, *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture* (Cornwall: Polity Press, 1999), p.1

Essentially globalization is used to describe what has happened to the contemporary world and how it happened, but it is so broad that it is not of analytic use unless it is first itself dissected. What I will try to do here is look at the fine detail of the popular perception that the world is becoming a shared social space (a global village) where everything is interconnected thanks to new technology and new political understandings.

I believe that postmodern political understandings are partly a response to globalization, but at the same time they are part of the driving force behind it and this idea is something that I want to carry through my study of the global era. What I hope to achieve by this is a better understanding of the role of the ideas of the sophists in their own time since I believe that the two periods share circumstantial links as have been discussed in previous chapters. Further to this I believe that showing an intrinsic link between postmodernism and globalization will help to show the practical usefulness of postmodern theory since thus far I have been unable to show the full importance of the theory in the real world.

The proof of globalization, like the supposed proof of any radical concept, is disputed: theorists like Michael Mann are quick to point out that belief in globalization cannot be proved, and that like postmodernism it may exist only in as much as people want it to, or feel it should exist.[91] Mann is cautious about making any simplistic assumptions about globalization and postmodernity (even as far as fully acknowledging their existence) but I must dispute this if I am to say anything at all on the subject. In order to make a meaningful study of the link between globalization and postmodernism I must put aside my relativism and agree that the phenomena exist, though I will still explore criticisms too, particularly regarding the extent to which globalization represents a change to the world order.

As one would expect from what is perhaps a demi-realization of pure postmodern theory, globalization is not uniform, rational or progressive. It

[91] Mann, 'Has Globalization Ended the Rise and Fall of the Nation-State?', in, Review of International Political Economy, 4:3 (1997), 472-96

draws from a multitude of influences and reinterprets them to create hybrid forms. The term 'hybridization' was used by Nederveen Pieterse to describe the development of the crossover culture that explained the origin of third way thinking: the development of new combination approaches to old ideological and practical impasses.[92] The principal is that fusing together existing ideas can allow access to, rather than create, new ones and this sits well with the postmodern philosophy that emphasises the importance of perspective and refutes originality. Trying to find new approaches to problems is not a new idea in politics and the idea of borrowing approaches from other nations and adapting them to different circumstances should not really be considered new either. Plato, the father of philosophy, accredited with one of the most inventive and original ideas in history, utilised the myth of the Spartan structure of governance when he detailed how philosopher kings should be allowed to rule for instance. Quite possibly he was utilizing an Ancient Greek form of hybridization that does not seem so different to the one that we can see in the world around us now, albeit on a larger scale thanks to enabling technologies of cultural exchange.

Modern technology is of course an important part of globalization and huge progress was made in the twentieth century allowing fast, affordable and reliable global communication and travel. The scale on which commodities, both material and cultural, can be exchanged is greater now than was ever possible in the past. That said however it seems likely that there will always be more progress, and what will be most remarkable about the so called ITC revolution in years to come will be the speed at which it happened. Enormous advances in a short period of time are bound to have profound effects and it strikes me that the effect seen in the twentieth century could have been emulated by the kind of expanded access to the world that trade contracts and the building of more and faster ships might have brought after the Delian League was formed in Ancient Athens. This link is I fear a little tenuous, since by its nature the ITC revolution was something completely

[92] Robins 'Encountering Globalization', in Held & McGrew *The Global Transformations Reader: An Introduction to the Globalization Debate* (Cornwall: Polity Press 2000)

unparalleled in history, though I am certain that I am not the first person to have trouble seeing beyond the apparent uniqueness of my own time.

Opinion about globalization is anything but unified and whilst theorists like Ohmae and Giddens embrace the concept, there are others like Hurst, Hay and Thompson who claim that the thesis is overstated. A wide spectrum of opinion lies between the hyperglobalist and sceptical theories and most prominent among these is the transformationalist perspective, which claims that we are drifting toward a more global world but sees the current era as one of transition though not necessarily by design. Examining capital flows and trade patterns is one of the best ways that we can asses the scale of globalism. What I want to do now is look at the monetary proofs of globalization, though I recognise that this aspect of the phenomenon is less significant an indicator of the postmodern than observable cultural and socio-political developments are. The reason for doing this is, as I have said before, that the economic, political and social spheres of our world are all intrinsically interlinked, and so proving the existence of globalization in one of these spheres will indicate the likelihood of its presence in the others.

The hyperglobalist claim is that there has been a huge increase in financial flows, facilitated by new technologies, that has had a profound effect on the stability of nation states, or more specifically on the sole sovereignty of nation states. In this interconnected age, nation states cannot be wholly autonomous or isolationist, as the international markets and the activities of multinational and trans-national companies will have an effect on them: if Wall Street sneezes, the rest of the world catches a cold as the expression goes. Trade has increased from seven to seventeen percent of world output since 1950 and between 1960 and 1996 the financial flows to developing countries exploded from $34.8bn to $251.9bn. Now every day world foreign exchange trading averages one thousand four hundred and ninety billion dollars yet despite these figures there are still theorists who doubt the existence of globalization.[93] In addition to this, the sales of cultural products and lifestyles,

[93] Held, McGrew, Goldblatt & Perraton, *Global Transformations*

industries based on the gratification of desires to experience the exotic other through travel and ownership of symbols, have boomed creating their own market in a way that simply would not have been possible without the ITC revolution.

The sceptical counterargument hinges on the fact that historically, the figures that we are talking about are not completely out of context. The Spanish and Portugese empire building of the 15th Century and the Dutch and English mercantilism of the 16th Century had both had profound cultural and economic influences on the world as it was, far more so than multinational corporations have now. This influence is magnified when one considers the slave trade that enforced mass migration and spread people and their culture across the world, throwing up a host of progressive hybrid and fusion cultures in its wake. Going even further back, the ancient empires such as Rome or Islam spread religion, race and structures, both economic and political, across the face of the world in a way that is simply not imaginable in contemporary times.

What is actually important about what I have said here is that whether or not globalization has occurred or is occurring, we still share a general perception that it exists. Most casual observers have access to what they see as happening around them over and above a detailed understanding of its comparable historic scale. Despite convincing academic arguments and historical precedents that indicate we are not doing anything particularly new, there still exists a common belief that the world has changed and we are living in some radical epoch, entirely unprecedented in human history. Now what I want to do is consider the effect that this change in our world has had on our politics and on our way of thinking. If the appearance of change has triggered formulations about change then logically change will occur, but what happens if the change in question is one away from the dictates of logic?

TWO WORLDS COMPARED

I have already stated that I believe some circumstantial factors contribute to the similarity of the theories produced by sophistic and postmodernist thinkers. In this chapter I want to examine these circumstances in greater depth through comparison. My claim is not a predeterminist one, and I do not believe that the thinkers in question are giving a scripted response to a recurrent set of social circumstance in the world. What I do think is that there are sociological similarities between the now and the then which have led to a revival of the older philosophy. This chapter will make an in depth consideration of first the domestic, and then the international influences on the sophists. I will then go on to compare the factors that might have influenced them to similar ones in the modern world (some of which have already been mentioned in the previous chapter) with the aim of finding a material justification for the conception of relativist critical theory.

The circumstances of the sophists

Athens at the time of the sophists was a culturally turbulent community. The political climate was volatile because of the affluence that was generated by the development of trade agreements and a protective alliance: the Delian League of *Poleis* (also known as the Confederacy of Delos). The League was originally formed to fight the Persians but it soon evolved into the Athenian Empire and took on cultural and economic aspects. The League enabled a great deal of economic, cultural and political exchange within Greece and, in the age of Perikles it was arguably the reason that Athens became important and powerful. Athens attracted professionals in every craft, including professional educators and public speakers; teachers of the influential and lawyers, collectively known as wise men or sophists.[94] I

[94] Coleman, *A History of Political Thought: From Ancient Greece to Early Christianity* (Cornwall: Blackwell Publishers, 2000)

believe that this moment in history exhibited some similar features to those present in the late twentieth century.

What the sophists offered was in great demand but how people felt about them was less clear-cut an issue. Even now opinion remains divided, and whilst some people view them as having had a liberating effect that allowed new forms of social awareness to be recognised, others see them as having had a destabilising effect. Part of the reason that Plato was so set against the sophists was because they did not accord to the status quo, and however right they may have been to question convention they did not contribute to future stability. It is ironic that Plato disagreed with them so strongly in this respect since he too objected to the enforcement of Athens' traditional morality at times. Plato's feelings about Socrates' execution by the authorities for corrupting the minds of others with his questioning and atheism attest to this fact. Since he was not a traditionalist one must question Plato's motivations for opposing sophist revisionism, and the most commonly accepted answer to this problem is that Plato valued stability above all other political goals. Plato wished to inspire a revolution in moral theory, 'a shift of perspective on the whole question of the right way to live.'[95] His objective was to discover an enduring formula for political order, stability and rationality, and to investigate the conditions under which these qualities might flourish. This desire for stability and order was Plato's central motivation as a political philosopher.

What I believe that Plato really objected to was the sophists embrace of relativism, which initiated an ultimately un-resolvable debate about the founding principles of science and morality. Their belief essentially undermined his own philosophical understanding of the world in a way that he could never completely counter. It is also quite plausible that he resented having to use their techniques in order to present his ideas in Athens, for dialectic may be more intellectually valuable than rhetoric but it will always lose in a confrontation. Even in Plato's dialogues sophistic tricks can be

[95] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981), p.9

found and it seems that Socrates cannot refute the sophists that he encounters without them, as is exemplified by the use of rhetoric and linguistic manipulation between 348 and 351 in *Republic,* where Thrasymacus is duped into agreeing that an immoral person is ignorant and bad when this is not what he really thinks.[96] In essence I think that Plato resented the sophists because he recognised the value of their work even if he did not agree with it.

Plato's personal opinion about the sophists is unimportant in the context of this debate since in fact, his claims that they were a menace to society might not have been recognised in his time. The sophists were respected teachers of technical skill in oratory and stagecraft, but they were also orators in their own right whose influence can be seen throughout Athens. Their public work in political debates and in the law courts was very much like the work of modern lawyers as is illustrated by John Gilbert's assessment:

> Both sophist and lawyer are well-paid professionals whose cleverness was admired even as it is considered suspect, both intellectually and morally. Their influence is deplored except when one wants it exercised on one's own behalf. We love them, we hate them, we love to hate them.[97]

The sophists were pillars of the community, and although the authorities took action against individuals seen as a menace to society like Socrates, the sophists were in a way above such suspicion.

Whilst sophistic beliefs were a reaction against the science of the presocratics, they were also founded in Athenian culture. The influx of new ideas from Athens' trading partners had an important effect on how people understood the world. There was a certain amount of crossover and merging of cultural and intellectual property, as is exemplified by the Babylonian and Egyptian mathematics that Athens began using, or the Phoenician skills in shipbuilding, navigation and alphabetic writing. Another example is the model

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[96] Plato, *Republic*, trans. Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 450c
[97] Gilbert, 'The Sophists' in Shields (ed.) *The Blackwell Guide to Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), p.29

of government that Plato borrowed for his thesis about philosopher kings, which seems to have utilised the existing theoretical structures of government in Sparta. As well as sharing between neighbours, Athens' international position allowed the city access to much wider ranging ideas and practices as is shown by the influence of Eastern philosophy on Plato's writing, or the influence of Jewish monotheism on Xenophanes theology and poetry. This all contributes to the persuasive idea that the revolutionary philosophy of the sophists may have been the expression of grass-roots radicalism based upon access to foreign influences.

Theory derived from cultural exchange is not an alien concept in the contemporary world. Many postmodern breakthroughs can be attributed to the observation of others since this allows us to better understand the self. More than this, cultural intermingling in the twenty-first century has led to the growth of hybrid understandings and structures that incorporate existing ideas but exist as something new in their own right. A good example of this hybridisation is found in popular culture where artists like Apache Indian make their music, "a meeting place where the languages and rhythms of Caribbean, North American, and Indian mingle, producing a new and vibrant culture."[98] A more contemporary example might be the hip-hop music of Eminem, which is a fusion of Black, White and Latino cultural products within the US alone: it serves to parody its contemporaries and even itself because it recognises the artificial nature of labelling divisions.

The Delian League

Much of the wealth and cultural exchange in the fifth century BC was possible because of the Delian League, which was established for the professed purpose (*proskhema*) of avenging what the league members had suffered by ravaging the territory of the king of Persia. According to P J Rhodes,

[98] Black, 'The Sounds of the City', *Anthropology in Action 1(1):* 11-16 (1994), p.15

> ...at its foundation the Delian League was an alliance of willing members, whose autonomy was taken for granted, the objectives of which included the protection of Greek states which were already free and the liberation of those which were not, from the Persians.[99]

This surface analysis belies a much more complex and organic arrangement. The League did not remain voluntary throughout its existence for instance and it was not always directed against Persia (though arguably the League became something different when Persia stopped being the enemy). Thucydides, the author of much of the history of Athens in this period, attempts to explain the shifting nature of the organization by claiming that the league might really have been formed in order to satisfy the Athenian desire to head up a wealthy, powerful and active alliance. This seems unlikely given the wealth of historical evidence that indicates how Greece was losing its war against Persia before the alliance was formed, but it does give a cohesive explanation for particularly Athens' behaviour. Retributive justice was a pretext for Athens to become involved with international relations, and more importantly, it was the concept that later enabled Athens to enslave the Greeks to themselves. In essence, the 'other' of Persia was manipulated through propaganda and used to establish domestic dominance.[100]

This insidious tactic seems quite familiar to the modern audience because it is something that we witness in the world around us. Contemporary examples of a state using international intervention to justify domestic unification are rife and can be seen in the Iraqi, Kosovon and Falklands wars (or interventions) since the end of the Cold War alone. Of course the Cold War itself was one extended example of this technique of comparable relative scale to the Greek war with Persia. Every incident during such a conflict is media managed to unite the population against 'the other' despite generally divergent domestic and individual interests. The interesting thing about Athens in this period is that it used this particular trick more than once: against Persia at first, then

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[99] Rhodes, *The Athenian Empire: New Surveys in the Classics No. 17* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.22

[100] Powell, *Athens and Sparta: Constructing Greek Political and Social History from 478B.C.* (Kent: Routledge, 1988)

later against Sparta and then a third time against Macedon when forming the second Athenian Sea League. The tactic puts me in mind of George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty Four where "the enemy" changes half way through the book showing the reader how unimportant who the actual enemy is as long as there is one, or rather so long as there is the perception of one.

In the late 460s political circumstances changed and Athens switched allegiance from Sparta to Argos and Thessaly. This eventually led to war, which broke out in 431 when Sparta invaded Attica, hoping to draw out the Athenians and crush them outside of the city.[101] The League, though originally founded to fight the Persians, fought under the command of Athens during the Peloponnesian War, which raged on and off between 431 and 404. The nature of the League was changing, as Athens and her allies fought against other Greeks who had an impressive record fighting the Persians, and alongside Argos and Thessaly who did not. According to Powell this marked "an important step in the development of the League into an Empire."[102] What makes it important for this study is that it shows how powerful and cosmopolitan Athens was at the time that the early sophists were writing, (which was from around 450 BC).

Of course Athens lost the war and in 404 Sparta imposed an oligarchic regime on the city that ruled for eight months until it was overthrown by returning exiles in a counter-coup. This was not the city's first experience of oligarchy as it had instated its own between 411 and 410, but it still represented a period of turbulence and a break from Athens' tradition of *demokratica* or majority rule (which in itself could be quite unstable). Since sophistry spanned until 380, this backdrop of change and conflict must have influenced their ideas. The birth and death of the movement seem linked to the rise and fall of the Athenian empire, a fall which was incidentally blamed on the "long-haired, bleeding-heart, pinko-faggot-hippie-atheist"[103] Socrates, who was tried and found guilty of these crimes. Socrates blamed the sophists

[101] Rhodes, *The Athenian Empire*
[102] Powell, *Athens and Sparta,* p.43
[103] Hooper, *Representative Chapters in Ancient History: An Introduction to the West's Classical Experience Volume 1* (Lanham, New York & Oxford: University Press of America Inc, 2000), p.187

for the demise of Athens in much the same way that many now claim that lawyers and litigation culture mark the demise of our world: he thought that they took things too far and their selfishness undermined the polis. Honestly, although he may have been right, the light of history tells us that the fall of the Athenian empire was far more tied to international events than domestic ones.

The sophists were engaged in the business of theorising when Athens was at the height of its power and throughout its decline. They were reacting to its position as a world leader and its achievement of empire status and perhaps more importantly the decline of that status (for it is easiest to criticise a society or principle when it has already begun to fail). I do not doubt that their theory influenced Athens but I also believe that the rise and fall of the Athenian Empire were events dictated largely by international political circumstances rather than the result of domestic educators. Sophistic ideas and rhetoric were swept up in a tide of material circumstances; they rode a historic wave, which I believe must have influenced their content.

A modern incarnation of Ancient Athens

Athens had a powerful navy and a defensive plan that allowed them to engage in a war that lasted almost three decades, furthermore they had a commanding position in world affairs at the head of an international coalition and central to global trade. It seems to me that most of the same things can now be said about the modern day USA, which has comparable security and intervention capabilities that it uses to maintain its extensive interests and influence other states, all the time promoting its liberal-capitalist values. Ancient Athens deliberately installed democratic governments in foreign states to consolidate its own power and the United States now encourages (using economic and political rather than military stratagems) what Athens once enforced. A direct parallel between Athens and the US exists in the Strategic Defense Initiative, the Star Wars II programme, which bears a

remarkable resemblance to Athens' Long Walls as a defensive military deterrent.

It is not really surprising that the United States bears some similarities to Ancient Athens since classical republican ideals were a foundation concept of the American republic. A modified understanding of civic duty and fulfilment through rational participation in society, although based largely on Aristotle's writing, was also a reference back to the state of Greek poleis in the time frame that this essay is considering. Jefferson was the primary advocate of importing Greek and Roman ideas and he summed up their values in his symbolic 'Yeoman Farmer'. This ideal citizen was autonomous, hard working and virtuous; he fulfilled his civic responsibility but did not become a pawn of the corrupt government that acted to prevent his self-fulfilment as a man.[104]

Proof that the USA was founded on classical principles can be found in structures such as the power sharing separated government, which can be likened to the Athenian model in design and intent even down to its formula for representation under which US Senators originally represented the wealthy landowners who were equivalent to voting members of the Athenian polis. Also the Bill of Rights (the first ten amendments to the American constitution) supports an interpretation of the American founding that emphasises civic humanist ideals of equality and autonomy rather than liberalist concerns with freedom. Protective laws such as the right to free speech or the right to bear arms (the first two amendments) are designed to rein in government and allow people to live independently. This and other evidence leads Pocock to claim that the founding fathers adapted Aristotelian and Machiavellian ideals, through the lens of the contemporary English theorist and opposition member James Harrington, to form the basis of their society.[105]

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[104] Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic 1776-1787* (University of North Carolina Press, 1969)

[105] Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975)

Perhaps this evidence can lead us to the assertion that the reason that sophistry and postmodernism resemble one another is that they are both born of similarly founded societies. This however seems too simplistic to me and I do not believe that one nation being founded of some ideas of another will automatically mean that the two societies have equal global success and throw up the same philosophy many years after their respective foundations. Besides all else, I am inclined to agree with Kramnick who claimed that, "Barlow and his friends, British and American, knew their Aristotle, their Machiavelli and their Montisquieu. But they also knew their Locke."[106] Clearly Locke's beliefs played some role in the founding of American politics as attested to by the fact that the US has a written constitution, and his liberal legacy can be compared to the classical republican one with the hope of finding the truth somewhere in the middle.

Comparative international relations

If domestic foundation principles are not the key to understanding the production of likeminded theorists, then perhaps international relations are. I will now look into the global relations of the two demi-empires and how they achieved their respective world superpower statuses. In particular I will be focussing on what happened to the sovereignty of these nations and those around them in their time frames. It seems more than coincidence that two world leaders in their own times have produced the same essential political and philosophical counter culture, so perhaps the reason for this is the very essence of their global power. Just as a by-note before I continue, I will point out that although I talk about the US as the birthplace of postmodernism I mean this in a cultural rather than a geographic sense, and I acknowledge the responsibility of the Western world in general when referring to symbols in America.

[106] Kramnick, *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism* (Cornell University Press, 1990) p.198

> The sovereign city-state was the basis of the civilised Hellenic world, and no city-state was ready, if it could help it, to surrender any part of its sovereignty. In the face of a common danger, cities might be ready to combine together in a league, each parting with some of her sovereign powers to a common federal council but preserving the right of secession; and this was the idea of the Confederacy of Delos in its initial form.[107]

The sentiment expressed in this piece of analysis is one that modern nations share. They do not surrender their decision-making powers willingly to supranational organizations or other states. Britain's relationship with the European Union is an example of how reluctantly nation-states surrender elements of their sovereignty and how the right to pull out of the organization is retained in theory even if in practice this would be highly detrimental. In fact in the Athenian context the right to pull out of the organization was removed by Athens as protectorate, and attempts to leave were met with military force but this was not necessarily the founding concept.

The European Union makes for a good comparative case study since, like the Delian League, it links geographically and culturally similar states. Both organizations acted to impose rules on their member states and were simultaneously an investment and a renunciation of national power.[108] They do of course differ in an important way because whilst the league was originally a military organization, the EU was founded for economic reasons (to stabilise and reconstruct Europe after the devastation of World War II). Perhaps this is not too large a difference if one considers economics to be the weapon of modern warfare, as is exemplified by America's use of trade contracts and embargos for leverage when dealing with international situations. Referring to modern political-economics as war by other means is not an unfamiliar concept.

Something my analysis this far has been blind to is that Athens was clearly the leader of her alliance and controlled the tributed ships, soldiers and

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[107] Bury, *A History of Greece to the Death of Alexander: 3rd Edition* (London & Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1972), p.341

[108] Hague, Harrop and Breslin, *Comparative Government and Politics* (Macmillan press ltd, 1998)

wealth as she saw best. Athens even used the money in the League's treasury to build The Parthenon and to fund a series of public works projects in Athens when war was less pressing a concern and the only comparative abuse of power in relations between nations this century is seen when one considers the internal governance of the USSR. Furthermore, Athens forced a member state to join the league and recognize Athenian supremacy in 472. As Bury puts it, "Carystus was subjugated and made, in spite of herself, a member of the league."[109] This is an example of how the League evolved into an empire. The European Union style central political bureaucracies that tithed member states and united them behind a common social and foreign policy evolved, and was replaced by the dictates of the most powerful state: Athens.

Similarly to the case of Carystus, when the people of the island of Naxos decided to withdraw from the union in 468 the Athenian admiral Cimon besieged Naxos and forced it back into the league. This shows that although the member states were part of an alliance that valued liberty, independence and political consent, they were also at war and had to be pragmatic. Geo-historical and deeply entrenched cultural factors come into the equation when dealing with this situation too. We simply cannot look at the Delian League from out modern perspective and label it the Athenian Empire because we do not totally understand it and realise the culturally specific way that states interacted. The union was originally agreed to last until iron floated (i.e. forever) and Athens was the state who took upon itself, as the most powerful member, the duty of enforcing this and ensuring the alliance's security. Cultural sensitivities aside however it must have been apparent at the time that Athens was behaving imperialistically and Thucydides' comments support this assertion. How willing other nations were to intervene is not something we can now clearly know, although the lesson of post 1945 history is that other states can be slow to act when imperialism appears gradual.

[109] Bury, *A History of Greece to the Death of Alexander*, p.337

Then and now

Nation-states have been the organizing principle of international relations since the peace of Westphalia in 1684 but in principle they are not so different to poleis. Modern world relations may be conducted on a larger scale than that of the Ancient world but the structural principles remain approximately consistent. Although I accept that the modern and ancient worlds are very different, I do believe that the international situation surrounding ancient Athens is mirrored to an extent by the international situation surrounding the modern day US. My hypothesis is that the phenomenon of globalization, which we have a tendency to view as unique to our time, was as apparent in Ancient Greece as it is now. It is still a legitimate and valuable phenomenon because we believe that it is unique to our time but it could have been just as unique to the citizens of Ancient Athens and this might help to explain the similarities I have observed.

The connection between globalization and the sort of theory that this work is discussing is interesting and I will now try to explore it a little more. I believe that, as I have stated before, sophistic and postmodernist theory are founded on doubt and I further believe that globalization necessarily encourages this doubt. The cultural exchange associated with global interconnectedness leads individuals to doubt and question their own social norms. The exchange associated with globalization is not equal and this has led many theorists to claim that cultural imperialism is at work rather than a more benign and mutual process. The arguments I find most compelling are those that acknowledge the spread of Western ideas and cultural products to the rest of the world (the Levi phenomenon) but also take notice of the non-traditional forms that are becoming more common behind Western cultural lines.

The non-traditional forms that I am referring to are both the directly imported foreign ideas, products and processes, and the hybridised ones that can be observed too. I will now begin examining in detail the nature of the hybridising phenomenon that is globalization and will consider the proof of its

existence and its observable effects. If the link between the sophists and the postmodernists is to do with a familiar pattern of global change then this may allow us to better understand where we are going and may also serve to highlight similar ideas through the examination of periods of internationalising activity.

REALISING THE POSTMODERN

I have mentioned already that globalization and postmodern theory are linked but I now wish to explore this claim in greater depth: specifically I intend to answer one question. Could globalization have been a catalyst for the postmodern revolution? I have already discussed the intellectual background to postmodernism and I still acknowledge its importance, but just as I believe material and cultural factors were important for the development of thought in Ancient Greece, I believe that real world factors brought together under the umbrella term globalization were the midwives of postmodernity. This chapter will be concerned with the relationship between globalization and postmodernism and if it is able to conclude that postmodernism is the result of globalization, then it will lend substance to my claim that the similar circumstances of the modern and ancient worlds may have triggered the development of similar critical theory.

The relationship under scrutiny

Claiming that globalization simply gave rise to postmodernism is like claiming that the chicken hatched from the egg: it may (or may not) be true, but it is certainly not the whole story. The paradox inherent within the relationship between the theory and the phenomenon is that each apparently spawned the other. Globalization is as much about creating an open space for ideas as a global free-market of commodities and most of what is exchanged is symbolic rather than physical because of simple practical limitations (moving a trillion dollars in notes, let alone the gold that this currency represents, every day across the world is simply not possible). Equally, abstract postmodernism is meaningless until physically realised through structures such as those associated with globalization.

It is a commonly held understanding that new technologies such as the internet and instantaneous satellite communications (the ITC revolution)

facilitated the birth of the contemporary global era. Space-time compression and other material consequences of new technologies such as imagined communities, the accessibility of world cultures through travel and broadcasting mediums, and the natural development of corporatism by way of multi- and trans-national companies have led us to call the world global rather than any deliberate attempt to implement an ideology. In a sense globalization is much larger than anything that could be planned and because of this it is wrong to label it simply the result of postmodernism.

Counter to this idea one can look at the nominal origin dates of postmodernism and globalization; the former having been generally agreed on as the end of the 1960s, and the latter in the end of the 1980s, and claim that the timing fits the idea that the one inspired the other. These dates themselves are however not set in stone and I am happy to entertain Lyotard's claim that, "transition has been underway since at least the end of the 1950s, which for Europe marks the end of reconstruction."[110] He was talking about transition to a postmodern world but he could equally have been meaning a global one since both ideological understandings and world politics have changed enormously since then.

Some further proof that globalization has enabled postmodernism is found in a topic that I have already covered to some extent in my musings on Nietzsche. Since it is not possible for relativism and religious dogmatism to coexist, the existence of the former demands the demise of the latter. Globalization has arguably played a role in atheising the modern world and in doing so has enabled the ideas of postmodern thinkers to become credible. It has also arguably played a role in breaking down faith in the structures of pre-modernity, collapsing the totems of scientific truth and corporatism through rigorous journalistic exposition. What globalization and postmodernism react against more than the pre-modern though is the modern, and whenever a chance to undermine symbols of modernity presents itself that takes precedence.

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[110] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p.3

Actually there is an interesting relationship between globalization, postmodernism and religion. Although some lack of faith is perhaps necessary to initiate relativist sentiment, postmodernism does not simply represent a rejection of faith. Kieran Flanagan, in his introduction to a collection of essays about religion and postmodernity, claims that,

> Postmodernity has given rise to two contradictory movements in religion that are difficult to reconcile: first the quest for New Age spirituality; and, second, the imperative to rehabilitate tradition in mainstream religions that has given rise to the term fundamentalism. Far from confirming an indifference to religious belief, postmodernity reveals a search for spiritual differences.[111]

What Flanagan has realised is that the postmodern age is also a postsecular one. Whilst modernity encouraged rationalization of belief to the point where religion was a fast fading solution, postmodernity now stands for a proliferation of choice regarding belief. New Age religious beliefs, rekindled dogmas and individualist atheism can and do coexist in the postmodern age, and can coexist with the concept of relativism because one answer is not the postmodern solution. The proliferation of difference, as encouraged by postmodern attitudes and as enabled and enacted by globalization, has allowed every individual to engage in "a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament".[112]

Xenophanes of Colophon was perhaps the first critical theologian and his work in the 6th Century BC was perhaps as necessary a part in the birth of sophistic relativism as was Friedrich Nietzsche's assertion that 'God is dead'. Xenophanes claimed that, "Indeed there never has been nor will there ever be a man who knows the truth about the gods and all the matters of which I speak. For even if one should happen to speak what is the case especially well, Still he himself would not know it. But belief occurs in all matters."[113]

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[111] Flanagan, 'Introduction', in, Flanagan and Jupp (eds.) *Postmodernity, Sociology and Religion* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996), p.6

[112] Seamus Heaney, quoted in Pine, *Brian Friel and Ireland's Drama* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.13

[113] Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 21B34, (Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Professors* 7.49.4-7 Bury)

His work was fundamental in breaking down the old structures of *mythos,* which had prevented *logos* from flourishing. With the way paved however, it was not necessary for all subsequent thinkers to be monotheists like Xenophanes: breaking the hold that the old religion had on Greek thinkers allowed a proliferation of beliefs, including the atheism that Socrates exhibited and the belief in relativism that held sway with the sophists. In the 21st Century parallel, Anthony Giddens makes my point for me, claiming that although religion fell victim to modernising pressures it did not die off and in fact, "for reasons that are to do precisely with the connections between modernity and doubt, religion not only refuses to disappear but undergoes a resurgence."[114] The postmodern world is one where religion plays a role in mediating the relationship between self and society, the secularisation of modernity no longer holds absolute sway (since postmodernity rejects absolutes) and thanks largely to the enabling circumstance of global exchange both 'pick and mix' religious beliefs and fundamental ones have become a part of the contemporary cultural milieu.

There is a school of thought which challenges the link that I have so far claimed exists between new ways of thinking and a new world that both encourages and distributes the new ideas produced. World-systems theory analysts, building on the understandings formulated by Immanuel Wallerstein, claim that globalization is nothing new and that the increasing intensity of cross-border flows simply represents a perfectly conventional stage in the integration of the world-economy. In addition to this, the theorists make two further claims about globalization that I find most interesting: firstly they claim that,

> The globe has long been dominated by a single integrated economic and political entity – the modern world-system – which has gradually incorporated all of humanity within its grasp. Within this system, all elements have always been interrelated and independent. 'National economies' have long been integrated to such an extent that their very nature has been dependent on their position within a capitalist world-economy. The only thing 'new' is an increased awareness of these linkages. Similarly, ecological processes have always ignored state boundaries, even if it is

[114] Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p.195

only recently that growing environmental degradation has finally allowed this fact to permeate into public consciousness.[115]

What is so interesting about this is the fact that Wallerstein and his followers believe, as I do, that the international coming together that we see around us now is not unprecedented in history or necessarily associated with contemporary theory and ideology but rather results from the contemporary situation. It also leads on to the second claim that I find interesting, which is that globalization itself has become an ideology and it is used as a tool by elites within the world-system to justify changes (for instance to how companies must operate in order to be competitive or how public money must be spent in order to be modern) that ultimately benefit the haves by exploiting the have-not's.

If the sceptical world-systems theorists are correct in their analysis then I have been fooled. It is possible that postmodernism and globalism are fallacies; 'buzz words' designed to divert people from seeing the truth – that we are all wage slaves to the capitalism machine. Marx claimed that religion was the opiate of the people but perhaps in the modern secular world the new faith is found in idealistic ideas like those being discussed here and the worth that they are given is only that with which we imbue them. My problem with this idea is that I do not think that the machinery of modernity is unified or powerful enough to create such a convincing illusion of a new-era, just as I do not believe that governments have the capacity to organise mass cover ups as US supermarket tabloids claim that they do, but it does not mean that the possibility does not exist and that this is not something worth noting.

Aside from radical conspiracy theories there are other proofs that the two concepts are not as closely linked as I have so far indicated. One of the most central ideas of postmodernism is the rejection of metanarrative and it is highly sceptical of ideas that attempt to tie together a multiplicity of social phenomena and label them. This, somewhat ironically, is exactly what

[115] Hobden & Jones, 'World-Systems Theory' in, Baylis & Smith (eds.), *The Globalization of World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.143

globalization does and according to Lyotard's original formulations on the postmodern condition, the very idea of trying to tie together a host of world events, group them and make a universal theory that relates to them is in the spirit of high modernity more than anything else.[116] Similarly, the concept in question (as well as the concept of the concept) is distinctly modern in character since it appeals to the idea of progress towards a more united world, despite exhibited exemplar of fragmentation, be that good or bad. Even more modern than this is the simple assumption that the new world will be a democratic liberal capitalist one led by and shaped in the image of the USA, a veritable paragon of modernity.

The proof of whether a link between postmodernity and globalization does truly exist may not be something that can be proved here but my hypothesis is that they are two sides of the same coin sharing a symbiotic relationship. Even more than that, I believe that the postmodern approach of fusing ideas might actually be directly derived from the hybridisation associated with the idea of a global world rather than merely associated with it. According to my understanding postmodernism has resulted from the growth of world interconnectedness, and my reason for thinking this is the fact that whilst the exchange between postmodernism and globalization might be in both directions, the ITC revolution was a real physical enabler of globalization unlike any factor that contributed to the birth of postmodernism except perhaps the physical applications of that revolution; namely globalisation. Essentially what I am saying is that the causes of globalization are more real and tangible than the causes of postmodern theory, and because of this I think that the former resulted in the latter as an intellectual reflection of reality and a theoretical map for the continuation of fragmentation.

[116] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*

The future for these phenomena

Postmodern ways of thinking are a coping strategy to deal with the changing world according to my understanding and this is never clearer than when one focuses on global structures. Nation-states are seen to be failing as they face the challenges of the post-Cold War world and despite a continuing trend of centralization, sovereignty appears to the public to be crumbling.[117] Challenges come from within and without, from grass roots groups pressing for change, to multinational corporations following through their economic agendas. The effect that they are having is to change the existing structures of governance (as shown by the simultaneous devolution of decision making ability to Wales and Scotland and investment of power in Europe that the United Kingdom has experienced) and as the world around us changes new theories must be presented to deal with this. In my interpretation this is not so different to what happened when the Athenian empire was realised in the 5th Century BC.

My opinion here runs contrary to that expressed by many commentators on postmodernism who see the theory itself as destabilising. Heller and Feher claim that postmodernism has undermined rationality and made politics more unpredictable.[118] LePen goes further still and claims that the relativism of postmodernity is dangerous as it makes conventional atrocities such as genocide simply a matter of taste rather than morally wrong. To my mind these reactions echo those of Plato and Socrates who strongly opposed the ideas of the sophists who were also advocates of moral relativism in their time. Although it is possible that an 'anything goes' philosophy could harm society I find the argument that it necessarily does, unconvincing; dealing with a changing world requires the degree of intellectual flexibility that postmodernism provides (or the firm hand of tyranny to enforce acceptance which arguably is provided by high modernity) and as such those who are critical of it do not understand the necessarily transitive nature of the theory. Whilst unconventionalism may harm existing social structures and

[117] Smart, *Postmodernity: Key Ideas*
[118] Heller & Feher, *The Postmodern Political Condition*

understandings, conventional approaches might shatter society as we know it, being based as they are on an outdated understanding of the world. To use a crude analogy, postmodernism represents building walls out of paper which seems rather stupid compared to the bricks and mortar of modernity until one realises that the post-Cold War world is an earthquake zone where the flexibility of paper walls has its advantages.

In identifying world-wide diversity we have fuelled new ways of thinking and allowed interested parties to transcend the simplistic mantra of equality, replacing it in part with more fashionable contemporary ideas such as that of embracing difference. The claim of new-wave sociologists is that recognition of worldwide diversity is not enough and we must seek to integrate this diversity.[119] Essentially their claim is that we must be more postmodern because of and to further facilitate globalization. To my mind this indicates that the common perception of a new era comes from a greater understanding of the world around us and from the realization that 'our way' is not the only way.

[119] Archer, 'Foreword' in, Albrow & King (eds.), *Globalization, Knowledge and Society* (London: Sage, 1990)

USING THE THEORY

The intension of this chapter is consider the usefulness of political theory that I might be able to asses the usefulness of postmodernity. If even a watertight classical theory is inapplicable in the real world, then it is not the fault of postmodern theorists that their theory is not exhibited for all to see but it is rather the fault of theory itself. I am not doing this in order to be able to pronounce a judgement on postmodern political theory, but rather so as to allow me to better understand its nature in a context.

The usefulness of political theory

The usefulness of political theory is a much debated but little resolved sub topic in the field of politics that could on its own be the subject of a dissertation or even a thesis. Almost every textbook on philosophy, politics or sociology begins by justifying the value of the theorising that it intends to do, and this normally entails justifying theory itself to a degree. The following is an extract from Barbara Goodwin's textbook's introductory chapter entitled 'Who Needs Political Theory?' which I feel both proves this point and can be used as a starting place for understanding political theory.

> Political theory may be defined as the discipline which aims to explain, justify or criticize the disposition of power in society. It delineates the balance of power between states, groups and individuals.[120]

This statement is fairly typical of the attention that is usually given to questions about the role of theory: it makes theory sound important and practical but does not actually say a lot about what effect (if any) a theory can have on the world around us.

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[120] Goodwin, *Using Political Ideas: Third Edition* (Chichester: Wiley, 1992), p.4

The textbook I have quoted continues its introduction to the topic by claiming that political theory is a technique of analysis used to overturn or uphold existing structures of governance but it does not enlighten the reader as to how this occurs. It is one thing to believe that theories can be cited as justification or otherwise of the status quo, but it is quite another to claim that people can physically change the world by using them in the same way that I could physically change my garden using a bulldozer. How exactly theories interact with the real world is a genuine concern of mine and I would like to spend a little time trying to define the link that exists and how it is manifested. Is it the case, as Engels asserted, that, "Practice without theory is blind. Theory without practice is sterile. Theory becomes a material force as soon as it is absorbed by the masses."[121]? If this is the case then how exactly is a theory absorbed in this way?

Something that bothered me about Barbara Goodwin's introductory chapter is a contradiction that I found cropped up, and it is a common contradiction within theorising about theory. Claims about the functional and specific nature of political theory are refuted rather than backed up by the second stage validation of theorising which claims that the job of theory is to take an abstract, conceptual approach which gives some perspective on events out of the context of the mundane (or in other words outside of the context of the real world). It seems impossible for theory to be both practical and abstract, and equally for it to draw generalities from the close study of specifics.

The solution to this conflict is simpler than one might expect and it is revealed through consideration of an issue. The way that political theory works is by taking an event, a moment or an issue and examining it in minute detail outside of the normal workings of the world. This process is comparable to the method employed by a film critic who pauses the movie at a point he is interested in and then considers the significance and symbolism of the scene; he looks at the frozen scene in abstraction and considers it for what it is and for what it means in the wider picture of the film. When a political theorist

[121] Engels, letter to F.A.Sorge, London, Nov.29 1886, in Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1956), p.449

wants to consider an event he does so outside of the normal course of affairs and once he has analysed it, he uses his understandings of that event (within its context) to understand the wider world as far as is applicable. An example that shows what I am talking about is the work of Professor Timothy Luke of Virginia Tech. Professor Luke isolated an iconic moment of the early twenty-first century, the September 11th terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre, and used analysis of this moment to formulate a theory about how the post Cold War search for a new enemy has led the Bush administration to frame a "new normalcy" around re-branding global terrorism as a foe that warrants a perpetual war.[122]

Political theorists construct understandings of how the world works and how the world should work and then label the fruits of their labour ideologies. Whilst it is sometimes the case that societies work towards the fulfilment of an ideology, for instance some nations strive to be more democratic, it would not be natural for a nation-state to choose an ideology and then transform itself to match that – change is far more subtle and pragmatic and this once again calls into question the role of the political theorist. If all that a theorist does is construct a theory around what is going to happen anyway is he really doing anything of value? It seems like an unnecessary exercise to claim that we now live in a liberal world but there are factions of our society that would rather see us living in a socialist one, but the statement can be valuable when assumptions are shed and the key terms are explored.

Precise definitions of terms and in depth scrutiny of meaning are what make theory valuable because without these key elements argument, discussion and the communication of ideas are impossible. The work of the political theorist is to find the limits of very general feelings and make clear the inherently fuzzy picture that we share about the world and the future. Defining the generalities of human nature within the context of specific spheres of society is no easy task and even something relatively simple such as understanding the Marxian nuances of second wave feminism as exhibited

[122] Luke, 'Postmodern Geopolitics in the 21st Century: Lessons from the 9.11.01 Terrorist Attacks' [http://www.gechs.uci.edu/luke_paper.pdf], 04/03/04

by contemporary women's movements requires a leap of understanding based upon clearly defined ideas.

Like philosophers, political theorists must start from the foundation of finding accurate terms and limitations on what people in general assume they know. Once they have these however, theories and the ideologies that can be found or made from them can be used to change things. Marxism is a theory that radically changed the world, possibly because of its very existence rather than the manner of its implementation. If Marx and Engles had never written the Communist Manifesto and laid out their radical path to social equality would the 1917 revolution in Russia have happened, or the Cold War? The Third Reich was the result of the pursuit of an ideological goal too and although Adolph Hitler is not often referred to as a political theorist, the direction that he was able to lead Germany in was the result of a theory that he was able to implement.

Political theories can be used to restructure society when those who hold power chose to apply them though of course it must be noted that the very way that they are applied can change the nature of the theory. Before human error, corruption, selfishness and personal influences are mentioned as causes for a theory to deviate from its design when implemented, there will always be internal and external factors that will influence how an idea becomes reality: the terrain that the idea settles on and is bounded by will clearly influence the shape of the resulting structure. The path from conception to implementation is never smooth as is shown by the failure of communism, or by the compromised freedom that we now call free-market liberalism. This is due to the interconnected nature of the world, the whimsical nature of mankind and a multitude of other ever changing reasons that no theorist could ever fully conceive let alone factor into a theory.

Despite the practical limitations just outlined there is still a point to theorising, though exactly what that is depends on your approach. Aristotle thought that man could only be fulfilled through involvement with politics; in essence he believed that people should take responsibility for their world and be involved

in the process of improving it and themselves. Enlightenment thinkers believe that we can never hope to control something that we do not understand and imbued with great value the intellectual pursuit of all knowledge, including understanding about the tides that mould and remould our socio-economic world. Of course due to the nature of postmodernism its theorists must disagree with the modernist point of view that political theorising can be used progressively but yet if they saw no value in theorising they would invalidate their own work so they too use political theory in a different way, as a critical tool.

Political theory and postmodernism

The clarifative role of political theory is not entirely valid within the postmodern sphere of understanding since the movement does not value precision as highly as the scientifically concerned modernity. On the flipside of that argument however, understanding the differences between similar sub divisions of postmodernity is still important due to the individualist and prolific nature of the theory. Political theory is ironically a concept which is both rejected and embraced by postmodernism: on the one hand postmodernity places little value on trying to construct structures or meta-narratives, whilst on the other it values defining aspects of itself micro-politically. To understand postmodernism fully, the individual must stop attempting to use the tools of modernity: political theory as we know it relies on finding formulae for an idea and then rationalising and reproducing it in order to serve a practical, progressive purpose. The effect that postmodernism has had on political theory has been to warp it and change the way that it deals with subjects of analysis, making it more passive and expressive.

Postmodernism is perhaps more accurately described as a moment than a theory as it contains no driving essence that can be distilled into an ideology and used to direct the course of domestic or world affairs. Postmodernism may be a movement that is becoming relevant for sections of our society but it is not an ideology that could be adapted for use by a political party or an

ideal that could be the foundation of a corporation. Given this statement it is difficult to see how useful the theory actually is, but once again that is because we are viewing it through the tainted lens of modernity and assessing its viability rather than appreciating it. Postmodernism cannot be understood from the perspective of high modernity (which is infuriating as this is our default perspective) so we must think outside of convention and consider the theory from a more postmodern point of view, as an organic entity that is still growing and whose final shape is not yet necessarily even determined. The danger of leaping to conclusions is made all too clear by Janson and Janson who claim that,

> Postmodernism does not try to make the world a better place. In its resolute antimodernism, it is socially and politically ambivalent at best, self-contradictory at worst. Its operating principle is anarchism, but to the extent that it does offer an alternative, Postmodernism espouses any new doctrine as superior to the one it seeks to displace. In the end, Postmodernism remains essentially a form of cultural activism motivated by intellectual theory, not political causes, to which it is ill-suited.[123]

The authors go on to say that postmodernism is meaningless because of its contradictions but what strikes me about their analysis is that they are missing the point. If postmodernism did not contain contradictions and was easily understood and applied then it would not be a radical understanding, it would simply be another facet of the modernist hegemony, which, being all encompassing and so infused with our mindset, is very hard to break from.

The use of political theory in general is difficult to define but the use of postmodernism specifically is even harder. Postmodernism is not an artificially constructed theory like Marxism, or a politically useful one like Liberalism, it is rather a representation of a growing number of linked phenomena. Theorists can use postmodernism, but not as a call to arms against convention or as a goalpost of governance: rather it must be used as a tool for better understanding the modern world. To an extent the theory is destructively critical and works to tear down the structures of modernity but

[123] Janson & Janson, *A Basic History of Art* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1997), p.597

despite its potential intent it is not fundamentally effective, perhaps because it is not strong enough to challenge the core structures of modernity, or perhaps because it is unwilling to seriously harm the world that empowers it. Without modernity, postmodernity is meaningless and perhaps the reason that the theory lacks political direction is that it is reluctant to end itself, choosing rather to seep across society as the ever present reminder that the modernist hegemony is not the only mindset available. Essentially there seems to be little overarching practical application of postmodern political theory: the specifically focussed 'politics of identity' do not constitute this and for them ever to attempt to would betray their ideals of rejecting generalization. In all, what this seems to show is that postmodernism, in political terms, is a transitive tool. I believe that postmodernism is a bridging theory that will lead to some new prescriptive macrologically involved theory or ideology, but right now we are too close to understand the form that this will take.

I have already disputed the concept that ideology has ended since I do not believe that the postmodern experience is unique, however there is another dimension to theorising about this idea that I now want to investigate further. It is possible that ideology did not end in the 1990s because it had already been dead for some time.

> There almost never was an ideological age in America. The United States in the 1950s and 1960s is the outgrowth of what Michael Harrington has termed "the accidental century"; our contemporary crises are the result of unplanning technologically, economically and politically.[124]

According to this school of thought, what we have called political theorising in the post World War world has had little effect on what actually happens. The interconnectedness of the modern world means that realism, rather than idealism, is the dominant social force and society is far more pragmatic and reactionary than my recent theorising about postmodern political theory recognised.

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[124] Waxman (ed.) *The End of Ideology Debate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1969), p.5

The relief from ideology that is associated with postmodernity may actually also be a feature of modernity and in a way this is not a surprise. I have claimed already that postmodernism is meaningless in isolation since it fulfils the role of high modernity's rebellious child, so is it that strange that the two entities share a related ideological makeup? The ideas of modernism and postmodernism may be fundamentally opposed but the world in which they must operate is one and the same. It is a practical world where actions provoke reactions and simple biological needs rule supreme over lofty ideals. Marx claimed that before a man can aspire to politics he must be concerned with providing food and shelter for himself and his family and this understanding of the world is far more realistic than Plato's idea that man can live the best life on philosophy alone. Theorising about the postmodern may be different from theorising about anything in the modern framework but the world still continues to enforce the same rules of life regardless of the epoch that we seek to create an understanding of.

Given this realization, does postmodernity really matter and how can it be used constructively in everyday life? The answer can be found in practical exemplar. Baudrillard claimed that the media could create a "hyperreality" which would lead us to understand ambiguous events as something far more concrete. The example that he used was the first Gulf War where the hyperreality of war on a tyrant obscured other realities such as the exploitation perpetrated by Kuwait's oligarchy and the interests of the nations who committed troops to fight the war.[125] The very appearance of normality in the world, or the perception that the world is changing are perhaps further hyperrealities that require some analysis. Every piece of news that gets reported has a bias and not all worthy news even gets that far; the individual must be vigilant and not simply accept every hyperreality that is offered without question. Events must be scrutinised, the liberal democratic world that we appear to live in demands it, and postmodernism is a valuable tool for achieving this: one that should not be discounted because of its radical nature. Indeed this empowers it because capitalism is a self-justifying system

[125] Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place,* trans. Patton (Sydney: Power Publications, 1995)

and those who want to change the world (for instance those on the political left, or fundamentalists) can only do so by analysing events outside of the rule structure of the capitalist paradigm.

Continuing this trend of thought, perhaps postmodern analysis can help us understand why we believe that a new era is upon us. Baudrillard shared the sophistic understanding that all we have is perception and that what people perceive can be influenced, essentially meaning that what is true for them can be manipulated. The existence of the perception that the world is changing attests to this phenomenon regarding the nature of existence. We see the world changing because we believe we are seeing the world changing. Now although the sophists could manipulate the understandings of reality within individuals subjected to their rhetoric it would be quite ludicrous to suggest than the realization of a perception of change (intended to eventually bring change) is due to the influence of a small group of individuals now. Instead it seems that the understanding that we share about the world is evolving naturally and the role of postmodernity is to help people understand and come to terms with that natural evolution.

As individuals accept postmodernity they empower it, and it seems that education (or rather re-education) about the horrors of high modernity such as the greed of capitalism, the inhumane hand of the market and the iron cage of bureaucracy might spell the end of the modern world. Realization of the suppressed reality of negative modernity is leading people to imagine that the world is changing because that seems like the logical step; and in turn, because the reality that we exist in is only what we imagine, we are in fact changing our world. What postmodernism does for the individual is restore some degree of individual autonomy and encourage rebellion. It is ironic that postmodernism encourages dissent from the era that educated the individuals who believe in it and encouraged them to be original and entrepreneurial, but then perhaps that is the contradiction of modernity; that it will destroy itself because of, rather than in spite of, its self sustaining progressive nature.

No era lasts forever and it is natural that world systems evolve and change, even despite the structures that humanity insists on constantly assembling. Every empire falls eventually and every age must have an end, just as it has a beginning. The fall of modernity looms on the horizon, and as postmodernism runs its course the world stage is being readied for the new world order, though what that could possibly be is as yet unclear. It should be noted that postmodernism does not seek out this change, the theory is deliberately non-progressive, but if the cycle is to continue something must come beyond anarchic individualistic gratification and deconstruction.

THE CONNECTION TO SOMETHING LARGER

Every work is part of something beyond its own bounds. I now want to talk about the implications of what I have said here and I will do this in two veins. Firstly I will consider the hypothesis that if postmodernism is a response to globalization, as I have shown it may be, then could it be the case that all political theories are formulated in response to political realities? I will discuss this fundamental question with passing reference to several thinkers who have professed to understand the true nature of political theory. My argument here will be based around Marxian and Aristotelian analysis, which I believe supports my case. Secondly I will look at where postmodernism goes from here. I will speculate about what the future of the theory, and the practice of relativism are likely to entail, again with reference to those who have studied this field before me. In both sections I hope to find an intellectual formulation that sits consistently with everything I understand about the political theory that I have detailed throughout this work.

Political theory and reality

Karl Marx claimed, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point [of philosophy], however, is to change it."[126] He believed that intellectuals were remote from reality, but that this was not how things should be. His theory, following this assertion, was deliberately responsive to the issues that people faced in the real world because he respected man's need for survival above lofty political ideals. Throughout Marxian work, class struggle is (or should be) the primary issue that should concern the majority of people, and the reason that this should be so is because of material needs. There may be enough resources in the world to satisfy everyone's basic survival needs, but the capitalist system works to divide those who own and those who do not, ever intensifying the gap

[126] Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach' (1845), in, *Marx and Engels Selected Works, volume 1*, trans. Lough (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), p.15

between rich and poor, between the *bourgeoisies* and the *proletariat.* Communism as an ideology is born of material concerns; it is an intellectual solution that is necessary because of the perceived social crisis that Marx and Engels saw as inevitable.

The Marxian base-superstructure metaphor can be applied to the process of theorising, as was best put by Marx himself when he stated that, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness."[127] My interpretation on this idea is that lofty goals, ideas and ideologies must be conceived and enacted by individuals who are subject to the real world first and their own imaginations second. Political theory and action are reactionary tools responding to actual, perceived, or potential situations and problems. A political theory may be pre-emptive and preventative but only if the problem that it is averting or solving has already been foreseen or predicted. Spontaneous independent theory does not exist, and if it did it would not be political!

I think that what Marx happened upon, by no means exclusively, was a fundamental rule governing how ideas and reality are connected. His understanding of the relationship may be the understanding that we most commonly have access to now, but it actually derives from an Aristotelian idea. Aristotle claimed, in response to Plato's claim that *Philo-Sophia* (the love and pursuit of pure wisdom) was the most noble and worthwhile activity available to man, that the pursuit of knowledge should be tempered by the base, but still important, needs of man. Aristotle famously claimed that 'man cannot live on bread alone' but he also recognised that man could not live without it.

Aristotle's politics is particularly interesting in this context because he actually had an ultimate reason for linking political aspirations with reality. He believed that 'Nature does nothing in vain', and so consequently, by following

[127] Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy,* trans. Moore and Aveling (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970-2), preface

the natural path one reaches the best possible conclusion. Aristotle employed a teleological approach to understanding the way of the world, believing that every type of thing and being has its own particular perfect natural end or good, its *telos*. The natural course is that this end or purpose will be achieved, meaning that the thing is good. The way to realize potential and fulfil purpose is through a specific type of work (*ergon*), which is indicated by the features (*dynamis*) of one's class of being. A duck, for instance, has webbed feet in order to swim, and according to teleological analysis; the observable feature, that the duck's feet are webbed, implies that it can achieve its 'good' of being able to swim well through the work of swimming.[128] Man's function is determined by his nature: he has a mind and the capacity for reason so his purpose is to best use it.

Man's *telos* is to achieve *eudaimonia,* which is often rather inaccurately translated as happiness, but means something more like success; a source of happy feelings. "To be *eudaimōn* is to flourish, to make a success of life"[129] rather than to simply be euphoric, and it involves an element of metaphysical completion. The important part of this philosophy in the context of this work, is that the fulfilment of the potential of the spirit or mind should not come at the expense of physical fulfilment however, as excellence in all human faculties makes man most complete. Of course, achieving excellence in every aspect of human life is not an easy goal to accomplish, and Aristotle is clear when he asserts that it cannot be achieved in isolation. He believed that "Men are not isolated individuals, and the human excellences cannot be practiced by solitary hermits."[130] In other words, to be complete, men must live and work together, and the optimal arrangement of this according to Aristotle was the polis. In short what Aristotle believed was that the achievement of lofty ends must be accomplished through mundane activity. Citizenship was the path to fulfilment for him and understanding this came from observing nature and reality. Marx saw political theory derived from political reality. Aristotle saw yet another level; he saw political reality derived

[128] Barnes, *Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982)
[129] Barnes, *Aristotle,* p.78
[130] Barnes, *Aristotle*, p.79

from nature, an ultimate source that was perhaps even part of a divine grand design.

Turning to a more contemporary outlook that supports my assertion I want to look at the apparent lack of political theory in a twenty year period of the twentieth century. If political theory can be nullified by historic circumstance then it must be the case that it is responsive to, or even derived from, the real world rather than a separate pool of ideas and inspirations that people can access through cerebral exploration. Stephen White, editor of the journal *Political Theory* explains the lack of political theory between the 1950s when it was pronounced 'dead' by Peter Laslett and the revival in the 1970s in the introduction to *What is Political Theory?* He does so with reference to several political realities of the period, namely "...trying to comprehend fully the horrors of Nazism, while pondering with growing terror a future of potential global nuclear destruction."[131] White is paraphrasing Laslett and justifying why political theory was inadequate due to an international situation. In wider terms what his reasoning shows, if it holds true, is that political theory is reliant on certain political realities. This may seem an obvious statement, but it reminds us that our ability to reflect on "political and social relationships at the widest possible level of generality" relies upon us having "evidence of the contemporary social and political situation"[132]. In other words, to produce a theory through reflection we must have something to reflect on, and what we produce will reflect, like a mirror at a carnival distorted by original insights and interpretations, what we started with.

What does this mean in relation to the claims that I have made throughout this work? First and foremost I stand by my analysis of two equivalent time periods that I believe have produced two similar political theories and realities. I think that the reason for the similarity of theory is the similarity (or rather equivalence) of the two political realities. The notion that ideas are reflections of realities, supports, and is supported by, my theory about how

[131] White, 'Pluralism, Platitudes, and Paradoxes: Western Political Thought at the Beginning of a New Century', in, White and Moon (eds.) *What is Political Theory?* (London: Sage, 2004), p.1
[132] Laslett, *Philosophy, Politics and Society,* 1st series (Oxford: Blackwell, 1956), p.vii

relativism is reborn. Individuals leave their mark on theories and systems but they are a small cog in the machine that governs the relationship between theory and reality. Furthermore, the notion that theory is born of reality on an essential level supports an understanding of postmodernism offered up by Heller and Feher that I have found useful throughout my research. Theory is influenced by the circumstances of its foundation so it is of no little significance that, "As a social theory, postmodernism was born in 1968. In a manner of speaking, postmodernism was the creation of the alienation generation disillusioned with its own perception of the world."[133]

Developed postmodernism

Postmodernism is a young theory, one that is only now starting to be understood and applied, or perhaps more accurately one whose applications around us are just starting to be understood. If it is only now coming of age then it is interesting to speculate on what it will look like when it reaches maturity. The comparison between the equivalent circumstances of Ancient Greece and the modern world that I have championed throughout this work points toward one idea as I see it. The idea is that our epoch is a transitory one; what we do politically now is part of the build up to something else, something radical and new that as yet we cannot see. Like masons chipping away at a block of stone we are headed toward an Aristotelian finished product, a product (or in our case, a politics) that we will only know when it is complete.

My evidence for this assertion is historic but it is supported by contemporary analysis of the postmodern problem (or the aftermath of the postmodern solution to the modern problem!). In ancient Greece the ideas of the sophists reigned supreme in the period between when the presocratic scientists formulated their flawed understandings of the world, and when Plato's disenchantment with contemporary Athenian politics was eventually

[133] Heller and Feher, *The Postmodern Political Condition*, p.138

recognised to have worth. Their era was between when science failed the people and when a new moral education saved them. It seems to me that a political reality cannot be sustained for long on the basis of relativism and doubt, since by the end of Aristotle's life philosophers with positive theories were once again more recognised as important to the polis, as is evident from the role that Aristotle himself played in framing the Athenian constitution and establishing his school, the Lyceum. Did positivism truly dispel relativism? I don't think so, but what I do see is relativism having played its role and wiped the slate clean of unsupported falsehoods.

What we are heading towards could well be what Hegel would have called a "differential unity", a place where the various threads of historical development come together in a rich, mathematical, poetic and almost pre-determined way. The new era of politics may be one that combines the best elements of modern and postmodern theory and reality: combining modern solidarity, alliances, consensus, universal rights, macropolitics and institutional struggle with postmodern difference, plurality, multiperspectivalism, identity, and micropolitics. Perhaps what comes after the postmodern era is a time and a mindset that organizes itself along lines that combine the unity of modernity with the extreme forms and fragmentation of postmodernity, though it is hard to see such a compromise as anything less than a victory for modernity.

According to Best and Kellner, "one of the main dramas of our time will be which road we choose to travel into the future, the road that leads, in Martin Luther King's phrasing, to community, or the one that verges toward chaos... the one that establishes social justice, or ever grosser forms of inequality and poverty?"[134] I do not agree with this polar choice between the values of modernity and those of postmodernity since the picture is far richer that. Why not a return to an older set of values or ascend to a newer one? Compromise between the two camps of the contemporary ideological world might not be possible but that is not to say that these are the only two options available.

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[134] Best and Kellner, *Dawns, Twilights, and Transitions: Postmodern Theories, Politics, and Challenges* [http://www.democracynature.org/dn/vol7/best_kellner_postmodernism.htm] 28/06/04

I have mentioned already that postmodernism is a transitive state and that I think something new will replace it, just as the climate in Ancient Athens that allowed the sophists to flourish eventually changed. Relativism may be unsupportable in the long term but the problem with it is that it is also near irrefutable. Postmodernism is more than pure relativism, it encourages religious beliefs for instance, from the alternative, to the traditional and even the fanatical. Although without some fundamental proof, relativism can never fully be dispelled, postmodernism might well be shaken by events, since as a theory produced by theorists whose context is the world around them. This is the importance of the relationship between theory and reality. I think the claim premature and sensationalist, but none the less I acknowledge Julia Keller's assertion that the terror attacks of September 11th mark the end of postmodernism and the death of relativism because the acts showed the world that there are moral absolutes.[135] Events in the real world will be what end the reign of postmodernism, either directly, or through influencing the next generation of theorists. The threat of postmodernist relativism and critical rejectionism to social order will recede when the context is right, and they will leave a legacy of scepticism which will be slow to fade.

I am not so naïve as to claim that the new era will be the last. That is a mistake that has been made too many times throughout history, but I do think that it will be something worthy of being called a new era. "It could seem as if progress has led us to the brink of an abyss, and that it is therefore necessary to consider alternatives to it. For example, to stop where we are, or else, if this should be possible, to return."[136] Leo Strauss' rationalist point is a good one, the perceived failure of modernity does call us to consider an alternative to the standard progression of history, but even more than this, the postmodern way is to reject the simple structure of answers that he provides. The lesson of postmodernism is to embrace opportunity and options, to think

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[135] Fish, 'Can Postmodernists Condemn Terrorism? Don't Blame Relativism', *The Communitarian Network*, vol. 12:3 (2002)

[136] Strauss, 'Progress or Return', in Pangle, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p.227

outside of the box and that has to be what the new era will be built upon. I am not saying that the twenty-first century (or even the twenty-second century) will be based on anarchic alternativism, but that it will be founded from unconventional principles. If political theory echoes political reality, the theorists dreaming up the path of tomorrow will be doing so today, they will be experiencing the conflicted contemporary (global) world where modernity and postmodernity clash on every street corner, and their vision will be a reaction to or a reflection of what they know.

CONCLUSION

I have been looking forward to writing this chapter since I first started this work because it represents the essay I wanted to write from the start, from before I had to justify my claims or account for anomalies. It is not however the same essay that I would have written a year ago. Over the course of my investigation I have needed to revise my ideas about postmodernism and its relationship with the world: I now realise how complex a relationship it is. I also realise some of the problems with thinking of postmodernism as unique, or with thinking of it as anything other than unique.

According to some theorists, signs of postmodernism are all around us in the contemporary world. Times have changed and we have entered a new era, one presided over by a new intellectual consensus (or perhaps a lack of consensus) based loosely around embracing difference. This new era was not heralded by the winning of a war, or a spectacular and observable event: rather it was a gradual reaction to the hegemony of modernity. The postmodern era stands for everything that the modern era opposed, placing importance on breaking from contextual truths that serve only to perpetuate modernity. The new phase in the development of mankind is ironically not one that believes in the notion of development or is perpetually concerned with progression.

This golden image of postmodernism is not what I see when I look at the world around me. The fable of postmodernism is so prevalent and persuasive that it is easy to accept over and above what rigorous study tells us is the case about the phenomenon that is postmodernism. The world we live in though, is highly structured and regulated for the most part, and countless proofs exist that we are most definitely still experiencing high modernity: corporatism, for instance, has not collapsed in the face of a thousand alternatives. Postmodernism is something that exists at the periphery of our world understanding, and although it may be of growing importance it is not

even faithful to the theory itself to claim that it could become the mindset that everyone embraces in the future.

Postmodernism is riddled with conflicts that according to conventional understandings will be the seeds of its undoing: how, for instance, can it thrive when essentially its aim is the end of modernity but at the same time it is itself a by-product of modernity that is meaningless in isolation? Perhaps the problem here is that we, as observers and analysts, employ logic and the analytical tools of modernity to try to understand a movement so radically removed from the modern. One of the first things that we have to recognise about postmodernism to study it, is that it is different, even revolutionary, and as such it is not subject to some of the rules we take for granted. The problem when engaging in this study is that not every tool of understanding that we possess is as flawed as we are led to believe. Rigorous study of specific elements of theory and practice reveals some interesting similarities between high modernity and postmodernity. One big similarity that cannot help being the cause of many more, is that the two eras occupy the same space and time for the most part and a context must influence the form that any theory subject to it takes.

For this discussion to be meaningful (from a conventional perspective at least) some goals must be set. What I intend to do is present the key features of postmodernism and explain why they are important. I will recap my exploration of the role of the theory/movement/phenomenon as well as its nature in order to hopefully give it a meaningful context. When doing this, an important focus will be the question 'is postmodernism really revolutionary?' since that concern was central in my mind when framing this work. I do not want to repeat my assertions and analysis of the main body of this work, but I will draw attention to things of importance that I have discovered and revealed. The aim will be to combine all of my research and, without over simplifying things, give my individual verdict on postmodernism by combining the perspectives I have explored.

Pinpointing the birth of postmodernism is difficult, but because of the influence that reality has on theory it is important to understand the social mood that inspired this revolution. It is inaccurate to assert that postmodernism literally came after modernism, because the two share a symbiotic relationship. Like moss growing on the underside of a rock, postmodernism may have come into existence as soon as modernism did, but even if this is true, it is still problematic for when precisely did the world become 'modern'? Perhaps modernity took hold after the high industrial age at the turn of the century, but I find terming the 1900s as 'modern' does not sit well, and I think this is because the point at which the Western world was specifically remodelled as modern was when it was reconstructed in the wake of the second world war. In the 1960s the message of radical resistance to the status quo was shouted loud and clear by the youth of America at the same time as the early European postmodern theorists began expressing their ideas. To my mind this shows that postmodernism was not born with modernity, but born of it, evolving as a countercultural response to the overwhelming success of the modern project. The alternativism of the hippies was a response to a social context, the distribution of their iconic statements and imagery were the result of technological development, and the theories of early postmodern thinkers were founded on the work of their intellectual predecessors (both contemporary and historic). Regardless of these enabling circumstances the significance of the period cannot be ignored. Without becoming blinkered to instances of postmodern thinking before this period, generally it seems that the postmodern age can be narrowed down to the last half a century or so and this period is what I have based my study of postmodernism on.

In general terms postmodernism appears as a loosely bound collection of ideas that reject established understandings. Postmodernism is not a school, a collection of thinkers brought together by a single unifying understanding or method and with a single goal or argument, since the association between postmodern ideas is at best a loose one. What it is, is a post-conventional alliance of ideas, an antithesis of our subjective understanding of truth, a broad catch all endeavour and a nightmare to define with conventional

theoretical terms. Goals, tenets, methods and contexts are hugely varied and sometimes of incomparable levels of sophistication, but on some fundamental philosophical level, relativism is important to the genre. Not every postmodernist makes relativist claims, but in seeking alternative truths, postmodernists revive a fundamental philosophic issue that has evaded clear resolution since its conception. Relativism has cropped up time and again in the history of ideas in a somewhat cyclic nature and its importance within the field of postmodernism only serves to highlight the field's worth, and status as more than just a fad.

To understand relativism one must return to the birthplace of Western philosophy, Ancient Greece. Before Socrates, Plato and Aristotle there were scientists, the Milesians, who made claims about the nature of the world that were insightful and new, filling the growing void of understanding left in the wake of a declining religion, but were also fundamentally flawed. The pre-science of the Milesians lacked falsifyability: their theories could not be tested or refuted and because of this there was no reason why the ideas of one thinker were more 'true' than the ideas of another. Thinkers like Parmenides and Zeno paved the intellectual path to relativism in a reasoned, logical way, but the sophists really breathed life into it. Like postmodern thinkers do now, the sophists lived their alternative understanding and used it as their moral compass. The four sophists that I have spent time explaining in depth in the body of this work, Protagoras, Gorgias, Thrasymachus and Callicles, did not share an identical understanding of what it meant to be a relativist, but this did not matter; the agenda of using dialectic to distil contributory ideas into a single understanding (to rationalise) was irrelevant to them. To reject the concept of a single truly correct answer is to embrace a multitude of solutions, even ones that contradict one another. It is also, to understand that perception (image) is all-important and being a relativism means redefining ones conception of worth radically.

The sophists had a profound impact on their society, they were teachers, not of their ideas specifically but of their techniques. They also however were clearly a product of the world around them. Through the crystallized lens of

history we can see the theories that the sophists were reacting against and how they utilised the intellectual outputs of the philosophers who were their contemporaries. We can also see how the changing nature of their world must have played a part in the conclusions that they and others drew. The historic circumstances surrounding the birth of relativism were, put simply, the rise and fall of the Athenian Empire. This involved major changes to the political map (backed up by military action), an economic and technological golden age resulting from new trading opportunities and an intellectual renaissance inspired by cultural exchange. Although looking at the world around us it is difficult to observe the influences on postmodern thinkers because of the fluidity of events, utilising this historic model for the birth of relativism helps us to understand its rebirth. If nothing else, the circumstances surrounding the sophists indicate to us places we should look for influences on postmodernism.

Postmodern thought, like sophist thought, has been influenced by the work of other theorists: Kant, Marx, Nietzsche and hundreds of other thinkers, although not postmodernists themselves, can certainly be seen to have played a role in the formation of postmodern ideas. There are necessary intellectual stepping-stones on the path to relativism that analysis of Ancient Greece revealed to us long ago, and application to the present reveals again. Similarly there are events and trends in the real world that influenced ancient thought and have, to an extent, recurred in the late twentieth century. Globalization is the single most significant apparent change to international relations perhaps this century, but certainly since the end of the Cold War. It may be the case that globalization is in actuality nothing new, but it appears real and that is significant. The impression that the world is changing as a result of technological advances has had an impact on political thought, inspiring an impression of the world as a shared social space and a place of free cultural exchange. Postmodernism and globalisation share a link, they both seem to play a role in influencing the other and their existences are equally doubted due to their radical and intangible natures.

The problem with treating the postmodern as a revolution is that like globalization it may simply be nothing new. An individual in possession of complete account of the history of international relations could simply conclude that the scale or rate of increased international exchange witnessed in the late twentieth century is unremarkable. Levels of world interconnectedness are high, but within a context they are not necessarily out of place mathematically speaking. Similarly, an individual who was well versed in historic political theory could easily pick out strands of (supposedly revolutionary) postmodern thought that were lifted directly, either consciously or otherwise, from other thinkers' works. The global and intellectual revolution birthed in the twilight of the twentieth century seems to me to be a fallacy, a trick of the light that has inspired people to name and perpetuate the phenomena. I think that postmodernism plays a role, and that role may be one that leads (or even requires) people to think it is revolutionary, but the role is documented in history and part of a process larger than the individuals who believe in it.

Postmodernism is critical and deconstructionist, it is a theory that reveals falsehoods for what they are rather than showing us truths or answers. In terms of political theory postmodernism has no strategy for achieving any ideological goal. Practically, even if the world has radically changed it would be problematic to label this change a postmodern revolution because no part of postmodernism has demanded or inspired an uprising. Perhaps one might argue that a postmodern revolution is different to a modern or conventional revolution, and rather than being represented by rioting in the streets it is expressed more subtly and to the end of splintering political institutions and belief structures rather than overturning them. To my mind this is like saying that a postmodern apple is different to a modern apple because of its inedible skin, its citric taste and its bright orange colour. Postmodernism may reject old assumptions but it must conform to some extent with the definitive language of modernity or it becomes meaningless and this is really the crux of why one cannot claim that there has been a revolution.

How important is postmodernism? It would be nice if there were a simple formula for working out the value for any theory, but this is not an easy question to answer if one holds back from embracing epistemological nihilism. It is tempting to take a postmodern approach to this question and say that postmodernism is as worthless as anything else we believe. I think if that sentiment were truly at the heart of postmodernism I might just have to agree that it is worthless, but in reality the theory does not just give up like that. Postmodernism is a sceptical, critical, doubting theory that seems at first just to be concerned with pulling down the structures of modernity but there is more to it than this, and as a theory founded in pluralism it embraces 'the alternative'. Postmodernists step outside of the boundaries of high modernity and find their own individual solutions to how they should live in alternative cultural and intellectual frameworks: why should individuals who have the power of free choice and access to any idea they want not shake off geographical and temporal restrictions and experience shared or individual social worlds outside of the dominant one? High modernity inspires postmodernism and postmodernism in turn has its niche in the contemporary world, a world that I believe is now no longer adequately defined as either modern or postmodern.

My thesis is that postmodernism is not the new or unique phenomenon that being caught up in its influence can sometimes lead us to believe it is. To quote what was once the ultimate source,

> What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, "Look! This is something new"? It was here already, long ago[137]

It is poetic that once again I can cite the ancient to explain the contemporary, but given that the recycling of words and theories characterises the postmodern condition it is not out of place. By exploring the postmodern from a historic perspective one can see that the ideas are not original, and by studying the context of postmodernity, both intellectual and material (or socio-

[137] Ecclesiastes, 1:9, *Holy Bible: New International Version* (1973)

cultural) one can understand it as a reasonable and valuable theory. The critical value of postmodernism is clear, but it is also valuable as a coping strategy to deal with escalating problems of modernity such as the impression of nihilistic disempowerment and radical global societal change. Relativism and alternativism are important concepts in the world today, it takes nothing away from them that they have been documented as occurring before, or that they are explainable with reference to the events and theories that surround them. Postmodernism may not be as revolutionary as it first appears, but it is regardless a defining phenomenon of our times.

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