

Bedtime Radicalism

JACQUES DERRIDA



BTR

WRITTEN BY SLIM PHILOMATH



PT1 ————— POSTMODERNISM

INTERVIEW W/
PROF. IAN RHOD

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03.
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This is the transcribed
interview btwn Prof.
Ian Rhoad of American
University and Slim
Philomath regarding
post-modernism in the
21st century

Professor Rhoad

So it's a piece on postmodernism.

Slim Phil

Question:

Exactly. Yeah, exactly. Let's start. So, as I described in my email, I'm interested in investigating the history of postmodernism and by looking into philosophers that shared philosophy as well as the discourse surrounding postmodernism. Right. In my very limited investigation, I understand that postmodernism is a rejection of the enlightenment truths of modernism due to horrors witnessed and the breakdown of society caused by World War I, World War II, and the failures of capitalism and the failures of, Stalinism, just to name a few.

Professor Rhoad

Right, sure.

Slim Phil

And Stanford encyclopedia of Philosophy even provides a definition that I'll drop in the chat for you right now, actually.

Professor Rhoad

Okay.

Slim Phil

But what I came away from in this research is a lot, but I'm still a little bit confused. I do like how Jean Francois Lyotard described it as the incredulity towards meta-narratives. So I guess how would you define postmodernism?

Professor Rhoad

So I don't think that a definition of postmodernism is actually very helpful. I know that sounds like a dodge. It sounds like I'm trying to get out of answering it. But I don't think any philosopher that tends to be called postmodernist actually accepts the label. So I think the first thing to say is that postmodernism is a label that people ascribe to certain thinkers, that most of those who are called this label will actually reject it. They might identify post-structuralist, you might identify as post-Marxist, you might identify as a deconstructionist. But the term postmodernism is just such an indefinite sort of empty category that most feel uncomfortable saying that they're postmodern. So I don't know if it's helpful to define it. I think what's more helpful is perhaps to ask, what does it track? What is that concept getting at?



Because I don't think it's meaningless. I don't think it came out of nowhere. I don't think it's a mistake that people have started to use the term. But I think to understand the term in a way that's helpful is not to kind of pin it down with a definition like a set of necessary and sufficient conditions which would establish whether or not someone counts as being postmodern.

Professor Rhoad

I think the more interesting thing is what is that concept doing for us? What is it helping us articulate about contemporary life? And what I would say there is that it is as you were suggesting, a kind of rejoinder to modernism and certain commitments, beliefs, hopes that were characteristic of the European Enlightenment. Now, whether or not someone comes to question those commitments, beliefs, hopes, positions because of the horrors of the 20th century or for other reasons, there could be many reasons why someone might sort of say, wonder about a belief in a meta narrative. But it tracks a series of critical rejoinders to that tradition, let's put it that way. And I would say some of the main sort of points of rejoinder have to do with

a lack of confidence in some of the scientific and political ambitions of the Enlightenment. So the idea that there's a scientific progress based on understanding the world through the use of human reason, one of the champion causes of the European Enlightenment was that we can escape a kind of immature attachment to tradition, religious traditions, culture, and aspire to a position of universal knowing through the use of reason alone.

Professor Rhoad

That was one of the claims of the Enlightenment. And there's been increasing skepticism that that's possible. Another was that people are becoming more free, that history is a story about the progress of freedom, and people have become skeptical about that. Another was that people were becoming more self lucid, that they could understand themselves better through the development of things like psychology and introspection. And now we have this idea that actually we may not understand ourselves very well. So there's a series of anxieties that people are getting at when they talk about being postmodern.



And I think it has to do with the kind of lack of faith or original confidence in, say, a scientific project of knowing the world, a political project of increasing freedom and human happiness, and even the capacity to sort of understand oneself. So there's a loss of confidence that we are truly known to ourselves. As Nietzsche says, we are unknown to ourselves. We knowers. And if we don't really know ourselves, how can we be totally responsible for what we think and what we do? There's also a worry about autonomous action, free choice, self lucidity. Those kinds of ideals of the Enlightenment have come under attack.

Professor Rhoad

There's a lot more, of course, also aesthetically people sort of have a tendency to embrace things like irony, a kind of lacking confidence and authenticity. But maybe we can get to that later in the discussion. So I hope that doesn't seem like too much of a dodge, because I don't want to sound like I'm afraid to say what postmodernism is, but I don't think it can be defined in a sentence or two.

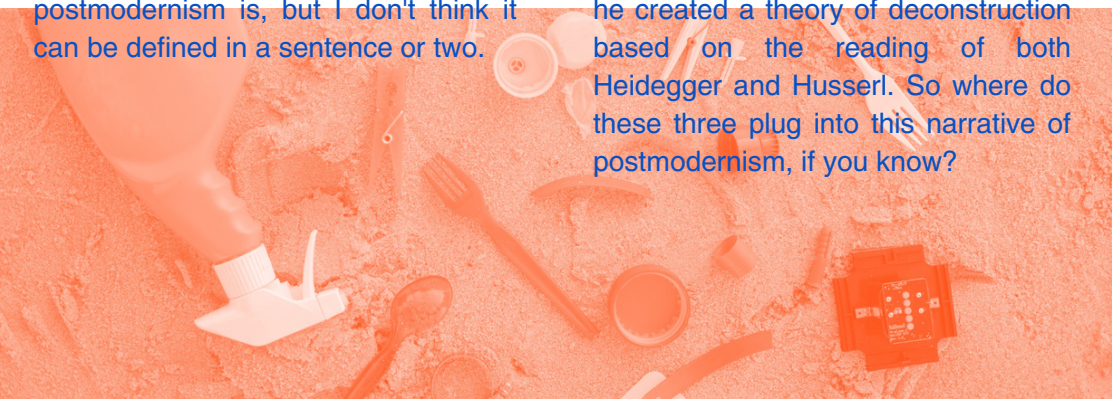
Slim Phil

I mean, yeah, that makes sense because, I mean, postmodernism again, is not only just like the philosophy, but there's different, art forms in postmodernism. So I understand it's not necessarily a one size fits all definition from what I researched. However, I know that you brought up Nietzsche and me myself. In my own research of existentialists, I was surprised to see that there was different existentialists and phenomenologists that were pretty much linked in with the tradition of post-modernism.

Slim Phil

Question:

So in my research, several philosophers came up, such as Heidegger and Derrida, as well as Foucault. So again, from my previous research, I understand Heidegger to be a phenomenologist, a pupil of Husserl, the inspiration for existentialists like Sartre and Beauvoir, but also quite literally a Nazi. My knowledge of Derrida is that he created a theory of deconstruction based on the reading of both Heidegger and Husserl. So where do these three plug into this narrative of postmodernism, if you know?



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And he often thought that this would have a kind of not liberatory or mandatory effect. It at least opens us up to sort of be more reflective and to question sedimented ways of interpreting the world.

Professor Rhoad

So Derrida is a postmodernist in the sense that he tries to unlock sedimented ways of thinking that have been sort of constructed by our traditions. And he tries to show that within these traditions there are moments in which these traditions become unstable if you read them closely. So he didn't just read something and take it down from the outside. He engaged in this practice of deconstructive readings which were to show how, if you read a text very closely, it actually has within it moments which destabilize its own primary narrative, put it that way, that it has the kind of obvious meaning. But if you read that meaning very closely, you'll show that it actually flips into something that will challenge it. So regardless if he was reading a work of philosophy or literature or if he was analyzing a moment in politics,

he would show that there are these moments of what he calls undecided ability built into the text, the context itself, which allow us to think and read it otherwise.

Professor Rhoad

Now, a lot of people thought this was scandalous because it meant that you could interpret things from a variety of ways which could tempt one to think that there is no ultimate truth to things. That as long as you can make an interpretation or offer a story, that your story is as good as any other. So people got very worried about what Derrida was doing. Now Foucault, the reason why I think he does sort of fit into this postmodernist picture is he sees power behind everything. So Foucault will analyze knowledge claims as being inseparable from power configurations. The production of knowledge cannot be understood outside of the power configurations in which knowledge seeking takes place. Certain statements are seen as intelligible or non-intelligible based on a larger background which is infused with power relationships. So for him, there's no sort of knowing the world outside of a network of power.



And that scares people because it makes it sound as if scientific progress, political discourse, moral discourse is already kind of already saturated with political and power interests. So the worry there is that if everything's power, then do we have actually a truth about the questions that matter most to us?

Professor Rhoad

Or is it just merely a kind of power play? But I would say both Derrida and Foucault. Neither took themselves to be destabilizing our institutions and our belief and knowledge just for the purpose of being nihilistic. They saw themselves as holding accountable those institutions, those apparatuses which produce our beliefs, our ways of knowing the world, our ways of communicating value and holding them accountable to sort of the prejudices that were built into them and opening them up to critique. So that's how I see those two figures as being, I think recognizably postmodern. Derrida's argument there is no sort of one meaning to things. That's always a work of interpretation and drawing our attention to the power

relations which are constitutive of the possibility of making sorts of knowledge claims.

Slim Phil

And then I find it very interesting (we're going to touch upon this on our fourth question), like you said, that people met these two philosophers with differing emotions, whether it be being scared to the fact that pretty much they're being critical to the powers at be. And isn't that criticality kind of the point of philosophy, to not just read in between the lines? But that being said, we'll touch upon that in the fourth point.

THEORY + PRACTICE





Questions? Comments? Email me your thoughts
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Bedtime Radicalism

JORDAN PETERSON



WRITTEN BY SLIM PHILOMATH



PT2 ————— POSTMODERNISM

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transcribed interview btwn Prof.
Ian Rhoad of American University
and Slim Philomath regarding
post-modernism in the 21st
century

we at BTR do not support Jordan Peterson

POSTMODERNISM

Slim Phil
Question:
So that being said, so events do not happen. Therefore, if we look at movements in history, understand that there preceded the current state, latter events to transpire this in the case of being a loss of faith in after the world pretty imploded during the W what not. So what ever led to the postmodern deemed as like almost academia that corrupts y minds?

Professor Rhoad
Good. In some sense. I ask you what your tho that and then maybe I you say because as a y what have you postmodernism? Mind what I heard coming u aughts, but what hav about postmodernism motivating you to write th

So that being said, so I believe that events do not happen in a vacuum. Therefore, if we look at the events or movements in history, we have to understand that there are events that preceded the current state that causes latter events to transpire. So we see this in the case of postmodernism being a loss of faith in human reason after the world pretty much self-imploded during the World Wars and what not. So what events today have led to the postmodernism being deemed as like almost a specter in academia that corrupts young people's minds?

Good. In some sense. I want to sort of ask you what your thoughts are on that and then maybe I'll riff on what you say because as a younger person, what have you heard about postmodernism? Mind me, I know what I heard coming up in the early aughts, but what have you heard about postmodernism, which is motivating you to write this article?

Well, I'm not going to lie. I have Instagram and I've heard a whole lot of what's it called?...What's his name? ...Jordan Peterson!

Right.

And I don't understand... I don't view him as to be a philosopher. And I've read philosophy all through undergrad and postgrad. And I feel as though, again, I don't have a great knowledge about postmodernism. But the views in which he paints it as... I don't view anything to be a corrupting force. I view philosophy to be pretty much meant to again, like I said, deconstruct. So his views on postmodernism, and other people too, almost antagonizes a specific group of academics. I've seen it before, and I feel like they're just putting a new name to the antagonism. Does that make sense?

Yeah, I think that's right. I don't know Jordan Peterson's work very well. I've seen him speak on interviews.

I think what he's worried about really isn't postmodernism at all. I think he's worried about what we might call the... there's a critical moment in the 60s and 70s where the people who were engaged in academic work, intellectual work, saw their work as being part of a larger progress towards emancipation and liberation. So one was not doing theory for theory's sake, right? Like, you might be interested in philosophical questions, but you thought asking philosophical questions was also part of a larger human quest for justice. So people who are inspired in that way, say, critical theorists, feminists, Marxists, thought that theory and praxis had to be put together when [they were] always thinking from a particular kind of moment of action. And the task of the philosopher was to reflect on the moment of action, clarify its principles, bring to view its situation, and then sort of contribute to the progress forward. Whatever political movement that you're part of. These tended to be left leaning political movements, and they had intellectuals that were espousing their principles and engaging in this kind of what we call praxis.

Professor Rhoad

Now, someone like Jordan Peterson is going to be very threatened by that because especially if his social identity, where you're a white male, CIS person, and I am, by the way, also all those things. So I'm not saying he's determinant in this way, but you might feel threatened that part of your position is under attack, right? And that someone who's espousing a more leftist political program is drawing these intellectual resources from these great works of philosophy and mobilizing for the sake of these political projects. So he's going to call that a kind of politicization of academia, politization of philosophy. But for these theorists and they don't have to be postmodern they may be Marxists, they would be feminists. They were seeing that their intellectual work was part of understanding the various ways in which power constructs society, how we are socially constructed, not just arbitrarily, but towards the interests of certain dominant groups and people. And that scares someone like Jordan Peterson.



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So I don't think that's a postmodernist issue so much as how do you see intellectual work and how does it enter into a larger sort of political social ecosystem? I can tell you that the people that I know that work in these fields, they will happily say that they have politics to their work.

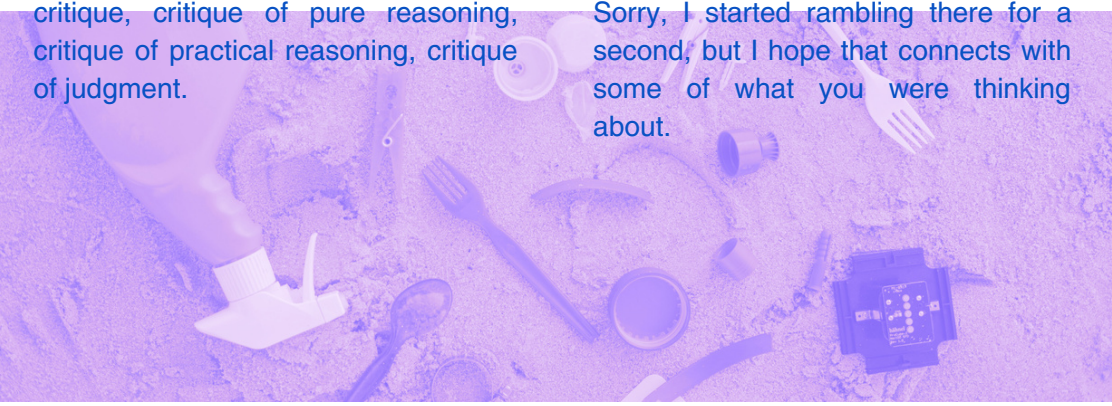
Professor Rhoad

But that doesn't mean that it's just merely like political propaganda. They're not engaging in critical theory in order to just crudely achieve some political means. It's rather they see their work as being part of emancipation, liberating, being reflective. And that's something that's actually quite a traditional move. I mean, I think ever since Plato, and even in Kant, you had this idea that by being reflective, we can make moral progress, we can make political progress. And so it's part of that tradition to me. To go back to Foucault, Foucault wrote his dissertation on Kant. Kant was in some sense, the original critical theorist. He wrote different books of critique, critique of pure reasoning, critique of practical reasoning, critique of judgment.

And the question of all those is, under what conditions is this particular thing possible? Knowing, acting morally, making artistic judgment, under what conditions are those possible? Well, the people in the 70s, like Foucault, were asking the same question, saying, under what conditions is this knowledge claim possible? Under what conditions is this kind of political institution possible? When did it come about? Under what conditions and how is it maintained? And so just exposing the conditions of our lives, showing them to be constructed, not transidentally, but socially is threatening the people that are committed to those institutions as things which should not change. Because once you show that something has been socially constructed that it came bound to certain conditions, and it's therefore revisable, the people that are invested in those conditions will have good reason to worry about that kind of political, intellectual movement.

Professor Rhoad

Sorry, I started rambling there for a second, but I hope that connects with some of what you were thinking about.



Slim Phil

That's perfect. And that's perfect. I really appreciate this. This kind of goes into my fourth point.

Slim Phil:

Question:

So then the million dollar question is, is postmodernism bad? So you don't have to be objective here, right? Frederick Jameson did not claim postmodernism to either be good or bad because he believes that you can't ascribe morality to historical situations. Yet, in my opinion author, Ira Chernus says that postmodernists attack the idea of master narratives, which are any story, which we tell ourselves to make sense out of all reality, or any other large piece of it. So this therefore, deconstructs everything from capitalism to Marxism, religion to evolution, psychology, war, ethics, government, literally everything that we convince ourselves with. Therefore, I don't think that there's any room for morality, but I believe that postmodernism is necessary because it does what philosophy is supposed to do: deconstruct. So what are your thoughts?

Professor Rhoad

My thoughts are the most committed to philosophy...I'm going to restate that.... You're not going to find

somebody more in love with philosophy than Jacques Derrida, right? He's not trying to end philosophy. You're not going to find somebody more committed to political freedom than Michel Foucault. So I don't think that the deconstructionists or the post structuralists are ending philosophy in a way. I mean, Derrida especially, he loved philosophy so much that he would just fall in love with reading this one footnote by Jean Jacques Rousseau over and over again, as the opposite of what Rousseau thinks he's saying. Derrida is described as being so faithful to the text that [he] sort of flip it into its opposite. But that's a way of being faithful, that's a way of loving it. So I would say that postmodernism is dangerous if you take it superficially, if you take it as license to say things like, oh, well, there are no morals, so I can do whatever I want. Or there is. No truth, so I don't have to educate myself. Or there can be false fake news, and I can say whatever I want on Twitter because it's all a free game.

Professor Rhoad

If that's your way of being postmodernist, then yeah, that's dangerous.

But the people that I know and the people that take seriously the task of deconstruction or critical theory, they are some of the most committed to the idea of truth that you'll find. To go back to Nietzsche, there's a moment at the very end of his *Genealogy of Morality* where you can read it as the moment which postmodernism gets this sort of announcement. He says, 'we're standing on the threshold of a spectacle in the next 200 years is going to be the auto deconstruction of Christian morality, of European morality'. And he says this spectacle is like the most horrifying, but also perhaps most hopeful spectacles because we're opening it, we're entering into the new age and we are standing on the threshold of this spectacle. And how does he describe it? He says it is that moment in which the will to truth has become **questionable** in us. Now, whenever I teach this moment about Nietzsche, I always emphasize that the idea here is that the will to truth is becoming questionable. It's not that you're just getting rid of it. It's becoming questionable to itself in a way that it wasn't before and it's becoming questionable in us.

Professor Rhoad

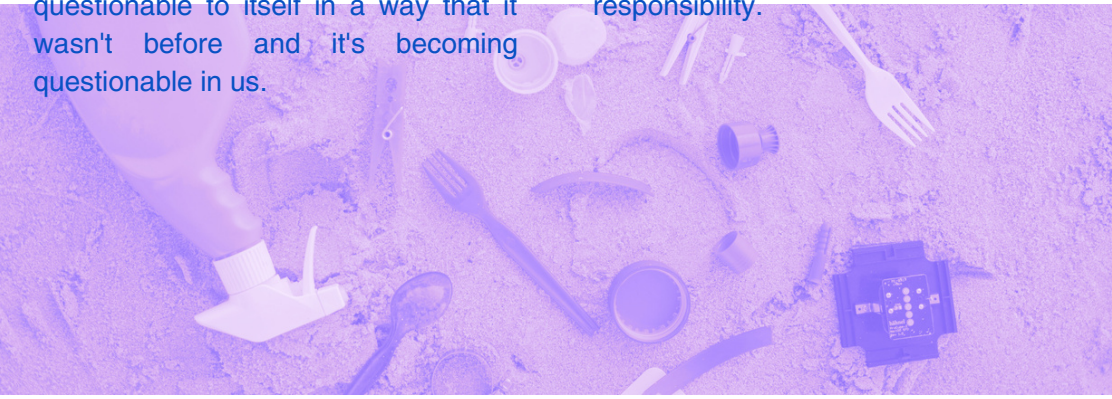
We philosophers, I'm going to use his language, who are animated by truth, who say that we are lovers of truth. That's what the word philosophy breaks down to. We're so in love with it that it's becoming questionable to it. It's not because we are giving it up, but we're so committed to it that our own belief in truth has caused us to call into question truth itself.

Slim Phil

Right.

Professor Rhoad

And this gives rise to a more aesthetic appreciation of truth rather than just the kind of scientific one. That's the story of Nietzsche's particular kind of postmodernism. But the point is that he earned it. He didn't just wake up one day and say I don't want to care about knowledge or truth or any of these things because I want to be able to do what I want and just help myself to that. He earned a kind of questioning relationship to truth. And so that to me is a sign of responsibility.



That is an example of somebody seeing this as one moment in the intellectual history of humankind in which we become curious about things and reflective, and it can become playful and hopeful and liberatory, because we can start thinking in new ways. We also can pay attention to things we weren't paying attention to before, including the experiences of people that perhaps weren't appreciated before. So it can be hopeful, it can be terrifying, it can be both. But the point is sort of how does it enter into your thinking? How do you relate to this possibility?

Professor Rhoad

And I think there is a lazy way to be postmodernist, but I think most of those people aren't philosophers. They're not really genuinely challenged by postmodernity, they're just helping themselves to conclusions. Whereas the people that are actually pursuing it from the inside. I don't think that can possibly be dangerous. (Well I guess it possibly could be,) but for the most part, it's actually just another instance of the mind becoming awoken to perplexities built in within itself, if that makes sense.

And that's just very modernist. I think the break between modernism and postmodernism is really not obvious to me, because modernity has always been self critical. Right. It's just that it reaches points of self-criticality that have perhaps weren't anticipated.

Slim Phil

So you're saying it's almost as if modernity has reached its threshold and that it crosses over to postmodernism and that the criticality is even more critical. Am I right or am I wrong?

Professor Rhoad

Yeah, it becomes certain assumptions that we didn't think we were going to be called into question. They said the dawn of the Enlightenment becomes questionable. Right. But the Enlightenment was always questioning. So this is why Derrida called it auto-deconstruction, that within the Enlightenment itself, there's a generative critical attitude which then becomes critical of its very beginning points, its starting point. So to me, it's continuous with modernity. It's just that we arrive at certain points where we didn't think we were going to arrive maybe in the 18th century.



Questions?
Comments?
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