

Don't Blame Relativism

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Are you now or have you ever been a postmodernist?

No one is asking this question quite yet. But if what I've heard and read in the past months is any indication, it's only a matter of time before people who say things like "there are no universal standards of judgment" or "there is more than one way to see this crisis" will be asked to turn in their washroom keys, resign their positions, and go join their terrorist comrades in some cave in Afghanistan. This new version of "America, love it or leave it!" is directed at a few professors of literature, history, and sociology who are being told that they are directly responsible for the weakening of the nation's moral fiber and indirectly responsible for the attack a weakened nation has suffered. This brand of scapegoating is no surprise when Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell traffic in it, but it's a bit disconcerting to come upon it in the pages of our most distinguished newspapers or hear it from the credentialed mouth of a commentator on National Public Radio or from Mayor Giuliani, who denounced "cultural relativism" in a speech before the United Nations.

And the drumbeat is growing louder. Roger Rosenblatt (who can always be counted on for facile piety) declared in *Time* that "the age of irony has ended," and that the "good folks in charge of America's intellectual life" will have to acknowledge that the real is real. In *The New Republic* (once a magazine you might actually want to read), Peter Beinert proclaimed that on September 11, "ambiguity became impossible" and "dissent . . . immoral." In a full page ad that appeared in the

New York Times, Leonard Peikoff informed us that the greatest obstacle to U.S. victory is “our own intellectuals . . . multiculturalists rejecting the concept of objectivity.” And John Leo (who at least is saying what we would have expected him to say) has fingered the “dangerous ideas” of “radical cultural relativism . . . and a postmodern conviction that there are no moral truths worth defending.”

In general two arguments are being run (often at the same time) in these pieces: first, the events of September 11 prove postmodernism to be wrong; second, postmodernism is somehow responsible for September 11—if not responsible for the fact, responsible for a diminished American resolve. Thus in the *Chicago Tribune*, Julia Keller proclaimed “the end of postmodernism” on the reasoning that no postmodernist could possibly retain his or her views *and* acknowledge the reality of a plane hitting a tower. But no postmodernist would deny this or any other reality. What would be denied is the possibility of describing, and thereby evaluating, the event in a language that all reasonable observers would accept. That language, if it were available, would be hostage to no point of view and just report things as they are, and many postmodernists do hold that no such language will ever be found.

It is this tenet of postmodernist faith that led Edward Rothstein to complain in the *New York Times* that postmodernists who say there is no such thing as an objective determination of fact, and say too that no one has clear title to the high ground of so-called universal principles, leave themselves—and us if we listen to them—without any basis for “reliably” condemning what was done on September 11. But that doesn’t follow at all. The basis for condemning what was done on September 11 is not some abstract vocabulary of justice, truth, and virtue—attributes claimed by everyone, including our enemies, and disdained by no one—but the historical reality of the way of life, our way of life, that was the target of a massive assault.

At times like these, all nations fall back on, and are right to fall back on, the record of aspiration and accomplishment that makes up their citizens’ understanding of what they live by and live for. That understanding is sufficient, and far from undermining its sufficiency, postmodern thought underwrites it by sending us back to the justificatory grounds we rely on in ordinary life after having turned us

away from the illusory justification of universal absolutes to which every party subscribes (no one declares himself to be for *injustice*) but all define differently. (That is why the invocation of universals doesn't settle disputes, but extends them.)

Knowing the Enemy

But of course it isn't really postmodernism that people are bothered by. It's the idea that our adversaries have emerged not from some primordial darkness, but from a history that has equipped them with reasons and motives and even with a perverted version of virtues we might admire, were their exercise not directed at destroying us. Bill Maher, Dinesh D'Souza, and Susan Sontag (a strange trio if there ever was one) have gotten into trouble by pointing out that "cowardly" is not the word to describe men who perform arduous feats in the course of sacrificing themselves for a cause they deeply believe in. Sontag grants them courage, which she is careful to say is a "morally neutral term," a quality someone can display in the performance of a bad act. (Milton's Satan is the best literary example.) You don't condone that act because you describe it accurately. In fact, by taking its true measure, you put yourself in a better position to respond to it. Making the enemy smaller than he is blinds us to the danger he presents and gives him the advantage that comes along with having been underestimated.

And that is why what Edward Said has called "false universals" should be rejected: they stand in the way of useful thinking. How many times have we heard these three new mantras: "We have seen the face of evil." "These are irrational madmen." "We are at war against International Terrorism." Each is at once wrong (in the sense of being inaccurate) and unhelpful. We have not seen the face of Evil; we have seen the face of an enemy who comes at us fully equipped with grievances, goals, and strategies. If we reduce that enemy to the abstraction of "Evil," we conjure up a shape-shifting demon, a wild-card moral anarchist beyond our comprehension and therefore beyond the reach of any counter-strategies we might devise.

The same reduction occurs when we imagine the enemy as "irrational." Irrational actors are by definition without rhyme or reason, and there's no point in reasoning about them on the way to fighting

them. These men are not irrational; rather they act from within a rationality we rightly reject, if only because its goal is our destruction. If we take the trouble to understand that rationality, we might have a better chance first of figuring out what its adherents will do next and then of moving to prevent it.

And International Terrorism cannot be the name of what we are up against. Strictly speaking, terrorism is the name of a style of warfare, and those who employ it are not committed to it but to the cause in whose service they adopt terrorism's tactics. It is that cause, and the passions informing it, that confronts us. Blaming something called International Terrorism—as if it were a career choice or a hobby detached from any specific agenda—only confuses matters, as should have been evident when President Putin of Russia insisted that any war against International Terrorism must target the rebels in Chechnya.

When Reuters News Service decided not to use the word “terrorism” because, according to its news director, one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter, Martin Kaplan, an associate dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California, castigated this reasoning as one more instance of the cultural relativism to which the virus of Postmodernism has brought us. But Reuters is simply recognizing how unhelpful the word is because it prevents us from making distinctions that would allow us to get a better picture of where we are and what we might do. If you think of yourself as the target of Terrorism with a capital T, your opponent is everywhere and nowhere. But if you think of yourself as the target of a terrorist who comes from somewhere, even if he operates internationally, you can at least take a stab at specifying his motives and anticipating his future assaults.

Let's Be Serious

In the period between the attack on the World Trade Center towers and the American response, a reporter from the *Los Angeles Times* called to ask me if the events of the past weeks meant “the end of relativism.” (I had an immediate vision of a headline—RELATIVISM ENDS: MILLIONS CHEER—and of a photograph with the caption, “At last, I can say what I believe and mean it.”) Well, if by relativism one means a condition of mind in which you are unable to

prefer your own convictions and causes to the convictions and causes of your adversary, then relativism could hardly end because it never began. Our convictions are by definition preferred; that's what makes them *our* convictions, and relativizing them is neither an option nor a danger. (In the strong sense of the term, no one has ever been or could be a relativist for no one has the ability to hold at arm's length the beliefs that are the very foundation of his thought and action.) But if by relativism one means the practice of putting yourself in your adversary's shoes, not in order to wear them as your own but in order to have some understanding (far short of approval) of why someone else—in your view, a deluded someone—might want to wear them, then relativism will not and should not end because it is simply another name for serious thought.

Serious thought is what many intellectuals, among them postmodernists, are engaging in these days. Serious thought is what is being avoided by those who beat up on people for suggesting that it would be good to learn something about where our adversaries are coming from. These self-appointed Jeremiahs forsake nuanced analysis for the facile (and implausible) pleasure of blaming a form of academic discourse for events whose causes reach far back in history and into regions of the world where the vocabulary of postmodernism has never been heard. Saying “the postmodernists did it” or “the postmodernists created the climate that led to its being done” or “postmodernism has left us without the moral strength to fight back” might make these pundits, largely ignorant of their quarry, feel good and self-righteous for a moment. But it won't help us understand what our next steps might be or how to take them.

After 11 years, the Communitarian Platform is again open for endorsements. The text of the platform, a list of previous endorsers (which includes John Anderson, Robert Bellah, Betty Friedan, Francis Fukuyama, and other leaders of society), and a form to sign the platform are available at www.communitariannetwork.org.