

An exchange with a reader on postmodernism

4 December 2000

We received the following letter on the article “The post-modernist wonderland: Intellectual Impostures by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont” [<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/jul2000/post-j01.shtml>] posted July 1, 2000 on the World Socialist Web Site . A reply by the article's author Stefan Steinberg follows.

Hello, Stefan Steinberg,

I read your article on postmodernism with interest and would like to make a few comments on it. I have the book [*Intellectual Impostures*], and, indeed, its remarkable approach is to confront some sectors of so-called postmodernism in philosophy, literary science or natural sciences with their own confusion. There is no need to dwell on Irigaray and Kristeva, because they do indeed, as demonstrated, have a completely feuilletonistic conception of the term “postmodern”. For them, as for many others, postmodernism is nothing more than an intellectual Disneyland intoxicated on arbitrariness where everyone can use *anyone* as they please. Eclecticism is the credo of these people. Just to even consider counterposing poetry with a mathematical parameter or reducing relativity theory to a gender-specific view shows a complete lack of argumentational sense.

But now to your reflections on “What is Postmodernism”. You underscore the claim by Sokal/Bricmont that the general tendency of postmodern thought is the rejection of a comprehensible objective reality and the introduction of relativism in all sectors of thought and science. The first statement is completely wrong, and the second one doesn't touch on relativism as it is generally understood, namely when one conceives of relativism as an outlook according to which every perception of the perceiver is only relatively correct, i.e., is not to be seen as generally valid.

Let us deal with the term itself. Around 1880, the English salon painter John Watkins talked about how he and his friends wanted to move forward to a “postmodern style of painting” (Higgins, Dick: *A dialectic of centuries. Notes towards a theory of New Arts*, New York, 1978). He thought this painting style he strived for should be more modern, as opposed to the French Impressionists. The term thus contains not a reactionary, but a progressive critique (we shall see whether it lives up to this). The term postmodern is also used by Rudolf Panwitz who writes about postmodern man in his book *The Crisis of European Culture* published in 1917; albeit also in the adjective form. Federico de Oniz used a completely opposite meaning of postmodern in 1934. For him, this was a category of the study of literature which he applied mainly to a correctional phase of histo-American poetry. Later, Arnold J. Toynbee also employed the term postmodern in 1947, but this does not need to be discussed in detail.

For our discussion, the term only really becomes interesting with the debate on American literature, as introduced by Irving Howe, who in his essay *Mass Society and Postmodern Fiction* (Partisan Review XXVI, 1959, pp. 420-36) heralded in a complete reversal with his use of the term. He describes contemporary literature as being characterised by limpness, as having lost its potency. This was an accusation (although he also considered it a natural development) inasmuch as he stated that the new mass society with its egalitarian forms found its approximation in literature, i.e., no longer possessed innovative power. Worth mentioning

are also *Leslie Fiedler: Cross the Border—Close the Gap* (Playboy, December 1969) (so there was “transcending of borders” already then!) and several others which I cannot deal with, since although I can name them (Joyce, T.S. Eliot, etc.), I don't know their writings. So that would be intellectual straw-clutching on my part. The important thing to note is that the term first became a central topic of debate in American literature of the 1950s.

The concept of the trans-avantgarde found its adherents in art at an early stage. What this means is that several modern artists no longer wish to see themselves as minions or propagandists of a social mission. Understandably, this will appear to you to be a peculiarity of individualism, since the social reference of art was, characteristically, always also the location of a social component, but, to use the words of *Bonito Olivas*, that doesn't mean that art has to be *a-social*, and will henceforth always be understood as an alarm system. In sociology, the term “postmodern society” appears for the first time in the writings of Amitai Etzioni (ibid: *The active society. A theory of social and political process*, New York, 1968). Etzioni defines society as a social *type* which, in relation to the needs and members of itself, is forced to constantly undergo self-transformation, and thus encounters society as dynamically and plurally defined. If we are to take things seriously, the term postmodern finds its first philosophical definition in Lyotard's writings (*La condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir*, Paris, 1979)—and thus we come to the essence of the matter. Actually, the whole point is that, initially, Lyotard wasn't even referring to postmodernism, but rather to the peculiarities of modernism.

So what, in the opinion of the “postmodernists”, is—so frequently mentioned—*modernism*?

“Today, culture strikes everything with similarity” is a central postulate of Horkheimer and Adorno, with which they join in a specific chorus of lament which was *de rigueur* in Critical Philosophy. And that is exactly the crux of the matter. In relation to intellectuals this meant that the identification of an identified subject with history, the intellectual who propagated the historically concealed subject of universal significance, can only be accessed through singularism and universalism—this era was finished for Lyotard. One of the tricks of modernism was the conception that the infinite allness (totality) is a rational aloneness and can be fully mastered by means of a universal science (e.g., “Technology is the essence of knowledge”—a guiding principle of modernism). As such, they also take a stance against Hegel and Marx, not because of affection with regard to contemporary perceptions, but rather because this proposition is contained in their philosophy. “The whole is the truth” is therefore the kernel of Hegel's thought as well. The meta-discourses of Lyotard thus contain not only Marxist theory, but also the claim to unity (totality) of theories in general. Modernism was, however, also defined by an oppositional stance, expressed in the attitude that “you can't improve on what is past, you have to build it anew”, thus questioning the given facts, which are to be superseded by modification and enhancement. The forms of rationality are diverse and are to be continued in like manner, so that a superior level can be achieved. Thus, dialectics are also contained in this.

You mention Heisenberg and Einstein. What significance does their science have with regard to issues of sociology in our context? As a result

of Einstein, Heisenberg and the scientific discoveries of the early twentieth century it was possible to set forth that all magnitudes defined in a reference system cannot be determined with complete accuracy. This applies both to Einstein's concept of time as it does to Heisenberg's delocalization of matter. The central proposition of both of them can be summed up for this topic as follows: there is no access to the totality, all knowledge is limitational. That Mach and Bogdanov wanted to deduce the non-existence of matter from this is basically of no relevance for the discussion of postmodernism.

Now, you say that they were not capable of coming up with a new conceptual approach, something new and creative. I disagree. The root causes for a postmodern position are precisely in the recognition of the diversification of sectors of production, of the changes in social structures, of the changes in communications brought about by technology, of the transition to the diversity of (postulated) forms of rationality. The change of modernity does not occur through abruptly breaking away from what has been, but rather through transformation. In other words: through a process! Postmodernism does not situate itself after modernity, but proceeds from the assumption that the postmodern tendencies are and were already contained in modernity, but were merely concealed. Truth, justice, humanity exist only in the plural and are thus counterposed to all hegemonial approaches (regarding types of thought, social concepts, orientation systems). Postmodernism is not anti-modernism, since plurality was already propagated by modernism (cf. Max Weber: the "polytheism of values" as a characteristic of modernity), but it is concretely opposed to the striving for unity in philosophy and social utopias, which in this sense are "meta-discourses".

"A postmodernist is someone who is aware of the irreducible diversity of forms of thought and life, and is able to use that recognition". That is a central proposition of postmodernism.

The postmodernist can understand the perception that society needs a new influx of enthusiasm, but in modernism this integrative effect is seen as only possible through a new unity; the postmodernist regards this as completely wrong. Yet it is not the position of postmodernism to say "Nothing needs to happen, everything is proceeding as it should"; that is a position of modernism. The argumentational structure is thus that there are new technologies and scientific discoveries, they are moving forward unstopably, let us create the way of thinking appropriate to them. Shouldn't there be a counter-position, in addition to the philosophical approaches of Popper, Habermas or Luhmann, that is not definable as "late modern"? Imprecision is the yardstick or, more rather, the exclusive claim of a proposition is questioned. Plurality, discontinuity, antagonism, particularity thus penetrate to the core of scientific knowledge. Exclusivities (monopolism/universalism) are discarded. Speaking with Adorno against Hegel: the whole is the untruth. And it is precisely this defence of diverse worlds of life and meaning that is the inspiration of postmodernism. As long as one perceives the dissolution of totality as a loss, however, one is still in the realm of modernism.

The primacy is no longer the unqualified correctness of the Own, but the fundamental right of the Other and a basic recognition of the Other in its otherness. Society is thus not only differentiated in the global view, but already in its day-to-day operations. Plurality is not seen as a new discovery, but rather, where it was only mandatory sectorially, it now becomes obligatory for the entire breadth of culture and life. Plurality is an historical good. Plurality is the current paradigm. The intransgressibility of manyness and openness are the redemption. Reality is not homogenous, but heterogenous; not harmonious, but dramatic; not unified, but diverse. There is a restriction of the types of discourse (i.e., anti-universalism) and thus a tendency against all totalizations; thus also the guiding principle of postmodernism. The philosopher is not called upon to deliver recipes for a just decision, but to make sure that the logic and practice of the debate is recognised and perceived as such. Sensibility

for the heterogeneous goals and types of debate, pursuing these goals, is the essence of contemporary humanity. They are the ideal of the postmodernist philosopher.

Frankly, I found this to be something new and not at all "the distorted reflection of a society that has long since run out of steam". But wherein lies the essential problem of postmodern philosophy? All this can be easily constituted as diversification (or rather the semblance thereof!), advances in technology, etc., and is still far from being a philosophy. The real essence of the debate are issues of political science, i.e., how can decisions regarding social processes be regulated in a binding fashion. So the pivotal aspect of the debate is, given that diversity is undisputed, what are the conclusions regarding unity? The philosophical question is quite different: *In view of the diversity of rationalities today, what is the possible and necessary form of rational thought?*

This is the subject that should have been debated, because it would have been much more interesting to investigate this question; that would have brought with it some nice "philosophical test series" that really do end up in cloud-cuckoo-land.

I will draw to a close here, but would like to add one more thing. It is an entirely unscientific method to imagine that one only needs to examine the biography of a person in order to automatically arrive at that person's philosophical world view. If I were to write a book about the Fourth International, it would be simply facile and petty-bourgeois to write a chapter entitled "From Ministrant to Revolutionary" in which I could point to the biographies of several members in order to say to the audience "Aha! I knew it all along, they're all pseudo-morphoses of Christian sects!". This is something I often noticed, and yet it is only a crutch that allows some lines to be filled with text (although it wouldn't be uninteresting). Moral valuation and sociological analyses are often intermingled here. You are certainly right in your basic assumption when you emphasise that "the degeneration of Stalinism was decisive, etc.... and propelled sectors of the intelligentsia to the right". That certainly applies to many French intellectuals, but to explain a philosophy by observing cultural life is as wrong as it could be. Lack of principles and "scientific objectivity" have no inner relationship whatsoever. Value judgements and knowledge from experience (as something *objective* in perception) are basically different. It makes no difference whatsoever who was once at the meeting of this or that group. That doesn't explain anything, but just pretends to.

I will finish here with best regards and hopes for the continued success of the web site.

MG

Dear MG:

thank you for your letter and comments on my review of the book *Intellectual Impostures* by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont. It seems to me useful to deal with a number of points you raise which, in my opinion, very accurately reflect the confusion and basically socially reactionary standpoint of postmodern thought which you defend.

In the first paragraph of your letter you write of the eclecticism of Irigaray and Kristeva representing "some sectors" of "so-called post-modernism". The insertion of "so-called" to somehow qualify the conclusions arrived at by Sokal and Bricmont is your own invention. While I concentrated in my review on the excesses of Irigaray and Kristeva, one of the strengths of *Intellectual Impostures* is the thoroughness with which the authors tackle not just a few fringe figures, but many of the leading lights in the French postmodernist movement. The inescapable conclusion after reading the book is that we are not just dealing with a few unhealthy branches which can be lopped off restoring the tree to health. The extent of the abuse of elementary scientific conceptions and procedures is so widespread in the school of postmodernism that we are forced to look at its roots.

In your second paragraph you reject my conclusion that the general

tendency in the postmodern is “the rejection of a conceivable objective reality”. You state that this assertion is “completely wrong”, but regrettably in the course of your entire letter you do not present a single argument either of your own or from any of your postmodernist role-models to defend the standpoint that there is a “conceivable objective reality”.

On the second page of your letter you develop an argument against my review with the words: “You mention Heisenberg and Einstein” and then conclude your paragraph with the claim that Mach and Bogdanov’s attempt to “deduce the non-existence of matter is basically of no relevance for the discussion of postmodernism”. First of all may I point out that I never referred to Heisenberg and Einstein (who vigorously opposed Mach’s arguments with regard to the disappearance of matter) in my review. I did refer to the controversy surrounding the intervention by the physicist Mach into philosophical questions and the response by Lenin.

Secondly, irrespective of the fact that you develop arguments against positions and people I do not mention in my article, how are we to proceed when you vehemently deny that the general tendency of postmodernism is the rejection of a conceivable objective reality and then rule out discussion of an historical instance when this was precisely the question posed? Why do you not want to discuss this issue?

I repeat, how are we to deal with the epistemological standpoint of postmodernism when you reject consideration of historical instances where this question stood at the heart of the debate? The writings of postmodernists on the issue of the movement’s epistemology are copious. Without excessively testing the patience of our readers allow me to quote one leading American postmodernist writer, Elizabeth Ermath.

In the customary smug tone which is a hallmark of such individuals she writes that the postmodernists: “no longer require an ‘objective’ world to guarantee like some sort of bank for intersubjective transactions—the relations between one consciousness and another, or to guarantee an identity between illusions. There is only subjectivity. There are only illusions. And every illusion, because it has no permanently objectifying frame, constitutes reality and hence is totally ‘objective’ for its duration” *Sequel to History*” (Princeton, 1992).

I could quote many another postmodernist sources who argue in similar fashion, but it appears to me that the message is clear. Miserable so-called modernists require the crutch (or bank) of objective reality in order to limp through life, while the canny postmodernists have succeeded in seeing through this deception, cast themselves free from the weight of earthly dross to drift off in the far superior realm of illusions and subjectivity.

The modern and the post-modern

Perhaps, to clarify matters, permit me to summarise your description of what you refer to as the “modern” and the “postmodern”. This is not easy task bearing in mind the incompatibility of a number of your own arguments. What is one to make of your definition of modernism involving an attitude which states: “you can’t improve on what is past, you have to build it anew ... question facts ... supersede by modification and enhancement ...” which sounds to me to be emphasising the active role of mankind in transforming reality and your later claim that a position of modernism is: “Nothing needs to happen, everything is proceeding as it should,” which appears to state that everything proceeds independent of man’s subjective intervention.

Notwithstanding such confusion a few fundamental positions are clear in your letter. You write:

1. “One of the tricks of modernism was the conception that the infinite allness (totality) is a rational aloneness and can be fully mastered by means of a universal science (e.g. “Technology is the essence of knowledge”). Continuing your argument you state that:

2. the meta-discourses of Lyotard (note) include the “claim to unity (totality) of theories in general.

3. You go on to support the German thinker Theodor Adorno against Marx and Hegel’s notion of “the whole” or “totality”.

4. Finally, you declare that the relevant question to be asked is: “*In view of the diversity of rationalities today, what is the possible and necessary form of rational thought?*”

5. Regarding the origins of post-modernist thought you state that the “root causes from a postmodern position are precisely in the recognition of the diversification of sectors of production, of the changes in social structures, of the changes in communications brought about by technology, of the transition to the diversity of (postulated) forms of rationality.” You reinforce this point later on when you speak of “diverse worlds of life and meaning that is the inspiration of postmodernism”.

In point 1. above you refer, I presume, to the basic premise of Enlightenment thought that the world is knowable and can be improved by the conscious application of science and technology. This general conception, developed over a period of centuries, resulted in the separation of science from religion and was bound up with, as well as being an active element in the transformation of one social system (feudalism) to another—capitalism. Why is this conception a “trick”—what is your argument to justify the claim that this is a trick? Furthermore when you reject the above premise, then how can you reconcile this with your statement that postmodernists do not reject the notion of a conceivable objective reality. Your critical attitude towards technology expressed in the same passage recalls, of course, the positions of the reactionary German philosopher Martin Heidegger which were dealt with in a recent series of articles on the *WSWS*.

In point 2, along with the three so-called “meta-discourses” of Lyotard which he rejects as a possible basis for any analysis of reality you propose to banish “theories in general.” Is this not rather a sweeping move? *Are you quite clear of the repercussions arising from what you are saying? Is not post-modernism itself a theory?*—confused, backward looking, tending towards subjective idealism—but nevertheless a theory. In this respect, in point 4 you pose the question “*In view of the diversity of rationalities today, what is the possible and necessary form of rational thought?*” and then also in the text: “how can decisions regarding social processes be regulated in a binding fashion ... what are the conclusions regarding unity?” But how is it possible to tackle such questions without a theory? i.e., a general conception of the world drawn from practice and experience which allows comparisons to be made and conclusions drawn as the basis for further practice.

Towards the end of my reply I propose dealing with point 5. Permit me first of all to take up your objections towards Hegel and Marx which are of course a hallmark of postmodernist thinking.

The popular conception of Hegelian thought propagated by postmodernists is to equate Hegelian dialectics with the dogmatism of Stalinist politics and declare that Hegelian thought is totalitarian, fixed and dogmatic. The postmodern version of Hegelian “totality”, as a scientific or philosophical concept, is infused with the content of totalitarian political systems to imply something rigid, dictatorial and oppressive to the individual. This is then proclaimed to be the state of the “modern”. Opposed is the apparent liberalism, individualism and anarchy on offer in a postmodern world.

In fact every leading figure in the Marxist movement recognised that the revolutionary core of Hegelian thought, freed from its idealistic shell, was to emphasise the transitional nature of everything seen through the prism of the dialectic. At the same time it is only possible to recognise this transitional nature because of the interconnectedness of all things and the fact that matter and thought are governed by general laws which themselves have to be discovered and *continually developed* in the course of concrete study in each particular field.

What did Hegel and the Marxists say?

In common with the main body of postmodernists you identify Hegel’s

conception of totality as the main enemy. What did Hegel say? In his work *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel writes: “The True is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development. Of the Absolute it must be said that it is essentially a result, that only in the end is it what it truly is; and that precisely in this consists its nature, viz, to be actual, subject, the spontaneous becoming of itself.” Hegel expressed the same idea in a more popular form in his *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, p. 128): “All things ... meet their doom; and in saying so, we have a perception that Dialectic is the universal and irresistible power, before which nothing can stay, however secure and stable it may deem itself.”

The decisive advance undertaken by Marx and Engels was to free the Hegelian dialectic from its idealistic shell and, based on their research of the real underlying driving forces of social and natural development, establish the dialectic on a materialist basis. In the introduction to his book *Anti-Dühring* Frederick Engels wrote as follows: “A system of natural and historical knowledge which is all-embracing and final for all time is in contradiction to the fundamental laws of dialectical thinking; which however, far from excluding, on the contrary includes the idea that the systematic knowledge of the external universe can make grand strides from generation to generation.” And then further on in the same work: “the real unity of the world consists in its materiality, and this is proved not by a few juggled phrases, but by a long and wearisome development of philosophy and natural science”. (*Anti-Dühring Chap IV*)

The dialectical nature of truth and cognition was also commented on by Lenin in the course of his studies of Hegel's *Science of Logic* during the First World War: “cognition is the eternal, endless approximation of thought to the object. The *reflection* of nature in man's thoughts must be understood not 'lifelessly', not 'abstractly', not devoid of movement, *not without contradictions*, but in the eternal *process* of movement, the arising of contradictions and their solution” (Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol.38).

Finally Leon Trotsky also drew attention in his writings to the advantages of the dialectical approach: “The dialectic does not liberate the investigator from painstaking study of the facts, quite the contrary: it requires it. But in return it gives investigative thought elasticity; helps it cope with ossified prejudices, arms it with invaluable analogies, and educates it in a spirit of daring, grounded in circumspection” (quoted in *Trotsky's Notebooks*, 1933-35 edited by Philip Pomper).

The acquisition of truth in the form of a fixed, unshakeable body of ideas or the notion that it is possible to arrive at a sort of final absolute truth (via perception) which you imply in your letter, has nothing to do with either Hegelian or Marxist thought. What both Hegel and Marx did emphasise is the possibility for mankind to *learn*, to develop theories, based upon which it is possible to change and improve nature and the society in which we live. In spite of its radical pretensions and phraseology, what characterises postmodernist thought is its essential conservatism, its readiness to accept the social status quo in favour of the small change of “micro-politics” and individual advancement. In this respect it is no wonder that the postmodernist movement is so hostile to the revolutionary implications of Hegel's dialectic.

The development of society and production

Let me at this point return to what I have designated your fifth point. You write that postmodernism has its roots in ... “the diversification of sectors of production ... social structures... changes in communication”, etc. You are referring in fact to a very contradictory process. While it is true that in the social sphere it appears that diversification (the creation of new nation states, the emergence of regionalist interests, sectional politics, etc.) is the prevailing tendency, the twentieth century also witnessed enormous strides towards the harmonisation of knowledge and the potential unification of humanity.

Based upon the advances in science in the last century it is now acknowledged that a profound understanding of the development of the

universe (astrophysics) is only possible with intimate knowledge of microscopic physical processes (microphysics). In very many branches of science there has been an increasing tendency towards integration and assimilation—physics and mathematics for example.

At the same time the potential for the unification of the world's population has been brought closer than ever before with the introduction of the computer and Internet communication. In the fifteenth century, Renaissance genius Leonardo da Vinci stated in one of his riddles: “The time will come when people from the most distant countries will speak to one another and answer one another.” To realise Leonardo's dream 600 years later is not a technological task, it is a *social* one—the overcoming of social inequalities founded in the capitalist system of production. Powerful objective processes are at work drawing humanity together. The main ideological obstacle to mankind making the steps towards a new international socialist community is expressed in confusion over the lessons of history and the hostility of sectional social interests—both elements of which are powerfully represented in the postmodernist school of thinkers.

One final point: at the end of your letter you write that is entirely unscientific to draw conclusions regarding someone's philosophical world-view from their personal biography and employ an analogy from the arsenal of Stalinism “from Ministrant to Revolutionary” to justify your point. The materialist approach to the issue of philosophical world-view has nothing, of course, in common with the crudities of Stalinism, but does that mean that there is no relationship between someone's personal biography and the philosophy he adopts?

The profession of the Dutch philosopher Spinoza was the precision grinding of lenses used in the first telescopes to peer at the universe. Did this fact have something to do with the philosophy he developed?—I think so. I could go on: Descartes wrote outstanding treatises on optics, Leibniz developed differential calculus, Kant developed his own theory of the universe. All of the great Enlightenment thinkers paid the closest interest to the development of science and made their own independent contributions. This concern with science is directly reflected and bound up with their philosophical outlook.

If the book *Intellectual Impostures* has made one thing clear, then it is the following: that bound up with their biographies, there is utter *contempt and hostility* on the part of postmodernists to the development of science and technology. Does this have a bearing on their philosophical world-view?—I think so.

I prefer the formulation of German philosopher Fichte as quoted by the Russian author Ilyenkov: “As Fichte said, the kind of philosophy you choose depends upon the type of person you are. Everyone is attracted to a philosophy which corresponds to the already formed image of his own thinking. He finds in it a mirror which fully presents everything that earlier existed in the form of a vague tendency, an indistinctly expressed allusion” (E.V. Ilyenkov, *Leninist Dialectics and the Metaphysics of Positivism*).

In closing I would like to recall your initial comments on the “eclecticism” and “Disneyland” argumentation of Irigaray and Kristeva. To be quite frank, with regard to the ideological eclecticism of your own contribution, your tendency to make sweeping statements without the slightest effort to seriously argue the case together with a thoroughly reckless use of language and concepts leads me to say that, in my opinion, you deserve Irigaray and Kristeva and they deserve you.

Nevertheless I hope, in the course of this brief note, I have been able to clarify some of the differences between the school of thought known as postmodernism and the ideas defended by the Marxist movement and the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Yours fraternally,

Stefan Steinberg

Note: I dealt with Lyotard's conception of meta-discourses in my



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