

# Rendez-vous with Uncertainty: On Post-Modern Politics

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*In the so-called modern era, things basically made sense. Despite frequent setbacks, technical dangers and brutal dictators most people believed in the possibility of a better future, in the idea of changing the world that was also changing us. But now we live in a post-modern world. And although that need not be a pejorative label, it does tend to emphasize uncertainty, spectacle, and even the chaotic.*

The term “post-modern” first came into use after World War II, referring to literature and art that took modern forms to their extremes. Since then, it has evolved into a general attitude toward society. Characterized by skepticism, it forces “authorities” and “their” institutions to defend themselves against charges that they are no longer relevant – or just ignorant. Does this sound familiar so far? On the plus side, that attitude helped bring down the Berlin Wall and sometimes puts experts and leaders in the hot seat. However, it also tends to challenge any strongly held belief.



Self-conscious and often self-contradictory, post-modernists tend to believe that truth is merely a perspective and nothing should be taken too seriously. The characteristic approach is ironic, emphasizing the doubleness in whatever is being expressed. One favorite grammatical device is quotation marks, either written of “air,” reinforcing the idea that the words don’t mean what they seem. This expresses the defensive cultural logic of late-capitalism, and plays well into the schemes of media and political demagogues.

Faced with machines that have made life more complicated and less secure, a vast amount of unsettling information, and an overwhelming variety of ephemeral “choices,” it is hardly surprising that people, especially the young, are no longer very impressed with much of anything. Their favorite media often revel in this sensibility and abandon the grand narrative approach once standard in novels. Although most commercial films continue to rely on the old linear formula – a hero overcoming obstacles to reach some obvious goal – few people actually believe in that scenario. Real life is so much more ambiguous and complex.

At its extreme such an awareness can lead to disillusionment, nihilism, and a disabling narcissism that favors fads and raw power over ethics and any ideology. And these days narcissism no longer applies solely to “beautiful people” who can relate only to their own images. Narcissists can also be pseudo-intellectuals, calculating promoters, or self-absorbed rebels. Even more unsettling, they are ideally suited for success and power – callous climbers all too willing to sell themselves.

In post-modern society, self-promotion is the ultimate form of work. It’s a state of affairs that, as we have just witnessed, can catapult a celebrity into power.

In post-modern society the electronic media promote both chronic tension and cynical detachment. Most advertising implicitly suggests that appearances are what matter, while many of the programs reinforce an ironic distance, often winking that it’s just a put-on. And the news? An endless stream of largely trivial “facts.”

What about truth? That’s the last thing we expect anymore.

The technology of journalism has advanced more in the last decade than in the century before. Yet more and more, print, electronic and digital media fill time and space with self-serving advertorials and questionable news – increasingly fake – often produced by hackers, PR firms and even governments. The race for circulation, clicks and audience shares has meanwhile placed a premium on titillation and superficiality, producing an ill-informed electorate.

Journalistic professionalism and credibility are in free fall. Compounding the problem, corporate ownership and bottom line thinking mean that fewer responsible and trained journalists are available, especially to cover developments in foreign countries and remote locations. US television networks employ at least a third fewer correspondents than they did 25 years ago. Radio newsroom staffs shrank by 44 percent between 1994 and 2001, and foreign coverage by broadcast and cable networks has declined at least 70 percent since the 1980s.

Newsroom staffs have also been slashed, unions have been forced to accept cuts, and the coverage has been dumbed down. More than 50,000 news industry employees, most of them newspaper journalists, lost their jobs in the first decade of the 21st Century. The result is that major stories go untold, and dire problems in many communities are ignored. It’s sad to admit, but professionalism in reporting may be going the way of shortwave radios, fax machines, and the single-lens reflex camera.

The inconvenient truth here is that there is no Constitutional guarantee that democracy will be fair, that people will be well or truthfully informed, or that the press will be competent.



In fact, US society is currently experiencing a crisis of fact, leaving people with little to trust or believe. More and more they consume only information that reinforces their opinions. It's a vicious cycle, and many journalists aren't helping. The first law of the profession today, as Alex Cockburn put it, is to "confirm existing prejudice, rather than contradict it."

Thus far, the post-modern age has been characterized largely by fraud and scandal – questionable elections, corrupt leaders, fabricated accounting that devastates the savings of thousands, doped-up athletes, and plagiarized or phony news. Even scholars have been caught plagiarizing parts of their books. It became so common by 2007 that a peer-reviewed academic journal called *Plagiarism* was launched. Its subtitle announced: *Cross Disciplinary Studies in Plagiarism, Fabrication, and Falsification*. One early investigation of whether student term papers had been faked found that at least 30 percent of the papers submitted online had been plagiarized, at least in part.

Another troubling development has been "photo illustration," frequently involving fabrication of images using digital tools. It sounds like harmless fun, but given the power of images it has the potential to warp public perception in the service of biased or inaccurate stories.

And how do the young get their news? Actually, many don't bother, and those who do want to know what's happening don't use print, or even radio and TV. They prefer handheld devices to surf online sources – many actually operated by think tanks and special interest groups that have figured out how to appeal to a mass audience.

The emergence of "citizen journalism" and "new media" has reinforced the notion that professionalism is no longer essential, and maybe even part of the problem. The post-modern idea is that everyone can be a journalist, promoting "conversations" among equals as citizen reporters aggregate, edit and sometimes create their own news. The more options we have, goes the idea, the less control traditional media have over what is relevant – and the better off we will be.

But this presumes that professionalism no longer matters, and standards aren't important. "New media" acknowledge few rules, but reliable reporting isn't really so simple. For example, recognizing the difference between news, opinion, commentary and rumor can be a challenge. Serious journalists also try to cultivate skills like how to conduct fair and constructive interviews, how to find relevant and complete – not merely convenient – information, how to see various aspects of an issue, and how to convey what they find out clearly, efficiently and accurately. Without such skills, the public is vulnerable to distortions, biased reports, and blatant falsehoods.

For all its benefits, the “blogosphere” has accelerated social fragmentation. Many blogs and Websites attract only like-minded people, creating a self-segregated news and information environment that serves the interests of extremists. It’s not so different from the partisanship that characterized the press in the early 19th Century. But this version is far more pervasive. As a result, truth and facts have become debatable and more difficult to define.

Conflict drives the news cycle, with partisan sources and obsessive bloggers often shaping the narrative. This makes it more difficult for people to reach agreement or even have a civil discussion, and easier for opportunists to ignore or distort reality for the sake of pushing narratives and initiatives based on convenience or private interests.

The result has been a loss of faith in almost everything, and an escapist mentality rooted in the belief that no meaningful change is possible. Popular culture feeds on this attitude, encouraging excess and striking poses while confusing commitment with fanaticism and “straight talk” with hate speech.

Yet it’s not all bad news. Along with skepticism comes re-awakened concern about the human condition and the planet’s health. The idea that “rational planning” provides all the answers is no longer so convincing, gone with notions such as “bigger is better” and nature is merely a resource to be conquered and exploited.

In economics, the rigid approach to production known as Fordism, named for the man who brought us the assembly line and mass production using interchangeable parts, has given way to a more flexible, eclectic system emphasizing innovation and a post-industrial compression of time and space. The view that corporations and the global economy are only parts of a whole planetary system is slowly gaining traction.

As with most post-modern developments, however, there is a double edge. Re-engineering economics and work could lead to more worker-owned businesses, a renewed sense of community and environmental responsibility, and a groundswell against corporation domination. But it may simultaneously increase instability, turning even more people into contingent workers.

Commenting on the implications, once presidential candidate Eugene McCarthy warned that post-modernism favors “fuzzy logic” and subjective impressions over rational arguments and clear thinking. It recognizes no absolutes, just degrees and disposable attitudes.

“This predicament is not altogether reassuring,” McCarthy concluded, “as it may lead us to a state of ‘entropy,’ i.e., of randomness, chaos and disorder, with little basis for optimism as to what may result.”

It has already given the US its first post-modern president. And that in turn opens the door for a right-wing cultural counterrevolution. Speaking on his own TV network years ago, Pat Robertson made the goal perfectly clear: “to mobilize Christians, one precinct at a time, one community at a time, one state at a time, until once again we are the head and not the tail, and at the top rather than at the bottom of our political system.”

In a country founded on the principle of church-state separation, this may sound unlikely. But we should not be surprised that opportunists have seized the current chance to distort public debate and promote themselves as national saviors. Demagogues and evangelists

have been doing this for generations. Not much has changed since the time of Father Coughlin or Joe McCarthy except the targets. Today it's everything associated with multiculturalism, progressive politics and social justice. Fueled by Fox News and conservative powerhouses like the Koch brothers, they have mass marketed an extreme and paranoid ideology while immersing viewers in a false reality. Specious arguments and patent falsehoods are presented as history, biblical truth or scientific fact. Too often mainstream media let the avalanche of misinformation slide.

An elaborate right-wing echo chamber has helped to create a distorted picture of contemporary reality that appeals to millions who feel insecure and hungry for clear and simple answers. In contrast, progressives have tended to put their faith in exposure. When enough people understand the extreme and illogical views of the Right, says this argument, their candidates will be rejected. Until recently, that felt like a good bet.

But too many Americans, alienated and uncertain about their futures and the safety of their families and friends, are vulnerable to the politics of paranoia and blame. Bombarded with disinformation they have placed their faith and the planet's future in the hands of a gold-plated huckster who offers them slogans as answers and the illusive hope of a return to "greatness."

Not very post-modern, and a recipe for even deeper disillusionment.



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