

# Work, Wealth and Postmodernism

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## INTRODUCTION

### **ABSTRACT**

*This Introduction explores both the nature of modernisation and the critiques mounted against it by the different bodies of postmodernist thought. The most successful model for “modernisation”, it is argued, is one associated not just with “capitalism”. Instead, it is premised on an embrace of market economies, respect for private property and individual rights, political democracy and legally free and mobile labour forces. Although there are sharp divisions within postmodernist canon – most particularly between Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida – the various strands of postmodernism nevertheless share a common hostility to the idea that human progress can (or should) be based on science, increased wealth and rational understandings of the objective world.*

# Introduction

## The Roots and Nature of Modernity

The modern industrial world, which owes its existence to the intellectual revolution of the European Enlightenment and the economic transformation of the Industrial Revolution, has attracted many critics over the last quarter millennia: Rousseau, Nietzsche, the English Romantic poets, postmodernists. Its economic achievements, nevertheless, represent a fundamental alteration in the nature of human existence. Exponential increases in both population and wealth, whether measured in economy-wide or per-capita terms, were the most obvious signs of this transformation. After almost a millennia and a half of near stagnation, the per-capita wealth generated in the West grew by 20 percent in eighteenth century, 200 percent in the nineteenth century, and 740 percent in the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

Mere statistics tend to disguise the liberating effect that industrial advance had on the lived experience of the great bulk of humanity. As Thomas Hobbes famously observed in 1651, the lives of people where there was “no place for industry” were “poor, nasty, brutish, and short”.<sup>2</sup> Before the advent of the railways, most people lived and died within a short walk of where they were born. Given the high expense of animal-drawn forms of land transport, most production was geared for local needs. When crops failed, people starved. In a world where candles and fire from the hearth were the only forms of night-time illumination, most people’s activities were dictated by the rising and setting of the sun. The absence of running water and effective sewerage meant that most people lived their lives in filth. As the British economic historian, J.H. Clapham, noted, in the seventeenth century even kings did not wash with Henry of Navarre confessing that they tended to “smell of their armpits”.<sup>3</sup> In reflecting on the consequence of this, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the first and in many ways the greatest critic of the process of modernisation and industrialisation, acknowledged the toll that this caused in terms of death and suffering. Writing in *Emile*, his treatise on education which he completed in 1762, Rousseau remarked of the human experience: “Almost all of the first age is sickness and danger. Half the children born perish before the first year”.<sup>4</sup> Unlike subsequent critics of modernity, however, Rousseau was too close to a “natural” existence to allow illusions as to what such a life entailed. Sickness and premature death, by winnowing out the weak and infirm, Rousseau argued, were contributors to social well-being. “A frail body”, he observed, “weakens the soul”.<sup>5</sup> “Medicine”, by offering succour to the weak, merely revealed itself “an art more pernicious to men than all the ills it can cure”.<sup>6</sup> It was, moreover, a crime against society to provide an education to “a sickly and ill-considered child”, as money spent on such an individual would merely result in “doubling society’s loss”.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Murphy, Jianwen Liao and Harold P. Welsch, “A conceptual history of entrepreneurial thought”, *Journal of Management History*, Vol. 12, No. 1, (2006), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hobbes (Ed. A.P. Martinich), *Leviathan*, (Broadway Press: Peterborough, Canada, 2002), 62. Note: Hobbes’s *Leviathan, or, the Matter, Form and Power of Common-Wealth, Ecclesiastic and Civil* was first published in London in 1651.

<sup>3</sup> J.H. Clapham, *An Economic History of Modern Britain: The Early Railway Age, 1820-1850* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 55.

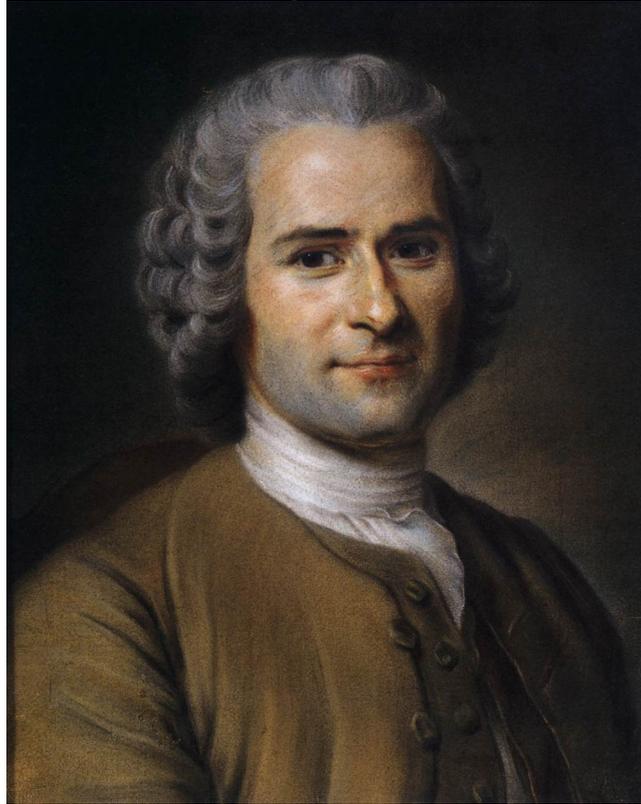
<sup>4</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau [trans. Allan Bloom], *Emile: On Education*, (London, UK: Penguin Classics), 47.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 54-55.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 53.

## Jean-Jacques Rousseau



*Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1712-78: French philosopher and political critic, Rousseau regarded industrialisation and increased modernity as presenting a fundamental threat to the human spirit. He willingly accepted pre-mature death of infants and adults alike in preference to the promises of medicine and science. Courtesy: Artist Maurice-Quentin de La Tour, 'Jean Jacques Rousseau', 1753. Held at the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva. (British Library Flickr)*

Modernisation through what we think of as the Industrial Revolution was due to the combination of four factors: the advance of reason and science through the European Enlightenment, the embrace of new principles of work and managerial organisation, the advance of social institutions that underpinned not only new workforce skills but which also acted as protectors of individual rights, and, finally, the adoption of new technologies. Of the four, the last – the adoption of new technologies – was in many ways the one of least importance. As late as 1830 the horse-power of Britain's stock of steam-powered engines remained minuscule. In Britain's textile industry, the first to experience large-scale mechanisation, initial technological advance was confined to spinning. Even in 1835, Pollard noted, steam-powered weaving looms were "relatively rare", leaving "large weaving sheds full of hand looms".<sup>8</sup> In the railways the victory of steam-powered locomotives over other forms of motive power was also slow and hesitant. Not until the opening of the Manchester to Liverpool railway in 1830 was the commercial viability of the new technology demonstrated. Even at this point the venture's promoters initially considered fixed cables in lieu of locomotives.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Sidney Pollard, *The Genesis of Modern Management: A Study of the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain*, (London, UK: Edward Arnold, 1965), 37.

<sup>9</sup> Clapham, *Early Railway Age*, 381-82.

If technological determinism (i.e. the idea that the adoption of new machines inevitably led to new economic forms) cannot explain the sudden eruption of the Industrial Revolution our understanding is also hindered by simple reference to terms such as “entrepreneurship”, “capitalism” or “management”. Murphy, Liao and Welsch, for example, ascribe the explosion of per-capita wealth that occurred in “the West” to “the advent of entrepreneurship”. Having made this claim, however, they then backtrack, pointing to the “success of entrepreneurship in ancient and medieval times”.<sup>10</sup> This leaves us none the wiser as to what it was that made the effects of entrepreneurship so transformative in “the West” after 1760. Similar confusions are evident in both Morgen Witzel’s *A History of Management Thought* and Niall Ferguson’s *Civilization: The West and the Rest*. In the former, Witzel concedes that modern management did “emerge” as a “discipline” in the nineteenth century, only to then argue that most pre-Industrial societies also boasted successful examples of “management”.<sup>11</sup> Ferguson, by contrast, readily advances the case for Western economic superiority but – by referencing as explanation the political fragmentation “which propelled Europeans to seek opportunities ... in distant lands” – fails to explain why the Industrial Revolution happened when it did.<sup>12</sup> A similar failing is evident in Karl Marx’s attribution of industrialisation to “capitalism”.<sup>13</sup> As Fernand Braudel demonstrated in *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, by the sixteenth century “commercial capitalism” – characterised by sophisticated finance and banking systems, domination of long-distance trade routes and control of luxury goods’ markets – clearly existed in an “already modern and indisputably effective form.”<sup>14</sup> What was it that made “capitalism” shift from such indubitably profitable commercial activities to a more prosaic but ultimately more revolutionary existence as a factory owner and industrialist?

To understand both the nature of modernity and the factors that led to its initiation it is useful to turn to a work written at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution and which, perhaps more than any other, continues to shape our perceptions of wealth creation: Adam’s Smith *The Wealth of Nations*. In popular lore, Smith’s study is associated with the view that modern economies are primarily driven by the “invisible hand” of market competition. However, while Smith was an obvious fan of market competition, he never actually spoke – contrary to popular mythology – of “the invisible hand of the market”. Smith also identified “the division of labour” as the key driver of greater production and material wealth. It was on this latter point that, in 1776, Smith began his analysis in *The Wealth of Nations*, stating: “The greatest improvement in the productive powers of labour, and the greater part of the skill, dexterity, and judgment with which it is anywhere directed, or applied, seem to have been the effects of the division of labour.”<sup>15</sup> As individuals, firms and nations specialise in those areas in which they have – through the application of intellectual and physical capital – a “comparative advantage”, so it is that markets grow in both their size and competitive extent.

Evidently, Smith, in his discussions of the division of labour had something more in mind than the pre-Industrial village market, stating instead that: “When the market is very small, no person can have any encouragement to dedicate himself entirely to one employment”.<sup>16</sup> For if labour and firm specialisation – and an associated growth in competitive markets – is to act as a permanent spur to economic growth than certain pre-conditions are required. First, a large surplus of food and, more problematically, fuel for

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<sup>10</sup> Murphy, Liao and Welsch, “Conceptual history of entrepreneurial thought”, 12, 16.

<sup>11</sup> Morgen Witzel, *A History of Management Thought*, (Abington, UK: Routledge, 2012), 7.

<sup>12</sup> Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the Rest*, (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2011), 39

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Karl Marx (trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling), *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, Vol. 1 (Moscow, USSR: Progress Publishers, 1954), Chap. xv (Machinery and Modern Industry), 351-475.

<sup>14</sup> Fernand Braudel (trans. Sian Reynolds), *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, (New York, 1975), Vol. 1, 319.

<sup>15</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, (London, UK: Penguin Classics, 1999), 109. Note: *The Wealth of Nations* was first published in 1776

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 121.

heating and cooking must exist for the support of urbanised population. Whereas by the sixteenth century the importation of grain from the east Baltic littoral (Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia) allowed for the maintenance of larger towns and cities throughout Western Europe, a continued reliance on wood for heating, cooking and the charcoal needed for steel making provided an insurmountable barrier to further urbanisation in most locales. Initially, only Britain was able to escape this bind, as “sea-coal” shipped from Newcastle and the Tyne Valley underpinned subsequent urbanisation. In London, as in other British seaports, seaborne coal became “a commodity only less indispensable” for existence “than bread itself”.<sup>17</sup> As Nuf noted, “There was no parallel on the Continent for the remarkable growth in coal mining which occurred in Britain”. By the early eighteenth century, the “entire production of the rest of the world did not perhaps amount to much more than a sixth of that of Great Britain.”<sup>18</sup> A second pre-condition for self-sustaining economic growth based on mass markets, competition and labour specialisation was the existence of effective communication and distribution systems. In *The Visible Hand*, Alfred Chandler claimed that the creation of mass markets and the consequent “managerial revolution” was pre-eminently an American phenomena, a product of railroad expansion and the telegraphic communication. In truth, it was the completion of Britain’s canal system that created the world’s first internal mass market. From 1761, when the completion of the Bridgewater Canal brought cheap coal supplies to the budding industrial centre of Manchester, an ever growing network of canals criss-crossed England and the Scottish lowlands.<sup>19</sup>

It is evident that Smith saw the growth of markets, competition and labour specialisation as marching more or less hand-in-hand with the growth of what we think of as industrial capitalism, i.e. a system of mass production based on private property and the free movement of capital and labour. This was, however, far from true in Smith’s time and it remains far from true today. As we have noted above, the urbanisation of Western Europe – which was associated with the retreat of feudalism, social diversification and an expansion of political rights – was initially dependent upon grain from the Baltic and Eastern Europe; a process associated in Eastern Europe with the growth of landed estates and the enserfment of a hitherto largely independent peasantry. In the Caribbean and the Americas, specialisation in the production of coffee, sugar, tobacco and cotton fuelled a massive expansion in global slavery during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>20</sup> In more recent times there are many examples of societies that actively participated in the global market and that, for a time, appeared to have sustainable economies but which did not allow the free movement of labour and capital: Franco’s Spain, Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and – among those societies still with us – the People’s Republic of China and North Korea. Such societies also showed / show little respect for human rights. Labour specialisation, mass markets and the creation of material wealth can thus clearly be associated with oppressive as well liberating social environments. The lesson of history over the last quarter millennia, however, is that societies that deny their citizens not only free movement of capital and labour but also individual freedom of expression have ultimately proved economic as well as political failures. And while the People’s Republic of China may prove an exception to this rule, the author very much doubts it. In taking this stance, this study shares Francis Fukuyama’s view that not only does China remain “an authoritarian state” despite its embrace of a market economy but also that, “All authoritarian regimes encounter resistance to their rule.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> J.U. Neff, *The Rise of the British Coal Industry*, Vol. 2 (London, UK: Frank Cass & Co., 1932), 103.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 322.

<sup>19</sup> Clapham, *Early Railway Age*, 75-82.

<sup>20</sup> Fernand Braudel, *Afterthoughts on Material Civilization and Capitalism* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1977), 93.

<sup>21</sup> Frances Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy*, (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 380-81.

The post-1760 process of industrialisation, associated with increased national and firm specialisation within a global market, can thus be seen as comprising not one but multiple paths, in which one – characterised by market economies that respect private property and individual rights while allowing free movement of capital and labour – has proven an enduring success while others – involving the use of serfdom, slavery and other forms of unfree labour – have proven ignoble failures. In the latter cases the advance of modernity has shown that societies based on unfree labour, and disrespect for private property and individual rights, are incompatible with societies characterised by the reverse. Historically, this has resulted in one of two outcomes: either the abolition from within of that part of the economy characterised by unfree labour – as occurred with the abolition of slavery in the British Empire and the United States in 1834 and 1865 respectively, and with the ending of Russian serfdom in 1861 – or total internal collapse (as occurred in the Soviet Union in 1991). It is wrong, therefore, to simply associate modernity with what the German sociologist, Max Weber, called “rational capitalism”, which he defined as a society “organised with a view to market opportunities, hence to economic objectives in the real sense of the world, and the more rational it is the more closely it relates to mass demand and the provision of mass needs.”<sup>22</sup> Unfree societies and societies that are, at best, only partially free – such as the People’s Republic of China – would appear to meet this criteria of Weber with comparative ease. Another criteria laid out by Weber – that the “real distinguishing characteristic of the modern factory” is not the application of technology but rather “the concentration of ownership of workplace, means of work, source of power and raw material in one and the same hand” – is also capable of being met by free and unfree societies alike.<sup>23</sup>

Given such definitional problems, how then can we demark modernity as an enduringly successful economic and social phenomenon from other, less successful forms of industrialisation? In *The Genesis of Management*, Sidney Pollard identified four factors which he believed distinguished what he called “modern management” and the “new capitalism” from other systems of production. First, a “new class of managers” had to be created that could weld together new technologies and new principles of work. Second, “they had not only to show absolute results in terms of certain products ... but to relate them to costs, and sell them competitively”. Third, they had to recruit and motivate a workforce “without powers of compulsion”; a requirement necessitated, Pollard argued, by the fact that “the absence of legal enforcement of unfree work was not only one of the marked characteristics of the new capitalism, but one of its most seminal ideas, underlying its ultimate power to create a more civilised society.” Finally, Pollard suggested, management had to develop a coherent set of theoretical and practical principles for organising work rather than rely on “ad-hoc” decision-making.<sup>24</sup> Whereas *all* of these characteristics *did* distinguish the *variety* of the “new capitalism” that emerged in Great Britain from the patterns of work found in pre-industrial societies, be they those found in Europe or elsewhere, all but the third can be ascribed to any of a number of unfree or partially free participants in the “new capitalism” that emerged after 1800. A great many of the slave-based cotton plantations in the American South prior to the Civil War (War between the States) would, for example, have not only used the latest processing and transport technology, they would also have paid close attention to their management accounts and costs of production.

Clearly, the roots of modernity must be sought as much outside the workplace as within it. For his part, Weber famously identified the advance of capitalism with the emergence of a “Protestant”, and more particularly, Calvinist “ethic”; an ethic which not only placed value on the pursuit of wealth as “a God-given task” but which also excused a

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<sup>22</sup> Max Weber (trans. Frank Knight), *General Economic History*, (Glencoe, ILL: The Free Press, 1927), 334. Note: Weber’s *General Economic History* was first published in Germany in 1922.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 302.

<sup>24</sup> Pollard, *Genesis of Modern Management*, 6-7.

“ruthless exploitation” of workers in the pursuit of “eternal salvation”.<sup>25</sup> Although there is some merit in Weber’s argument, we should nevertheless be wary of drawing a direct correlation between Protestantism / Calvinism and the “new capitalism”. Whereas there were, no doubt, many nineteenth century factory owners who took inspiration from their Calvinist faith, the same could be said of Protestant slave-owners in the American South and Boer farmers on the South African Veldt. Dan Wren, in his classic study, *The Evolution of Management Thought*, is arguably on safer ground when he emphasises the importance of a “liberty ethic” that emphasises “freedom and individualism in all spheres of human life.”<sup>26</sup> In highlighting the importance of a “liberty ethic”, Wren evidently had in mind not only the cultural values of the American Republic, but also the constitutional and political arrangements that guaranteed individual rights and liberties. Similarly, if we turn our attention to Europe and North America, it is evident that the advance of modernity (i.e. a variety of market capitalism characterised by a free labour force, private property and individual rights) has only advanced in a linear, uninterrupted fashion in nations where their culture and political arrangements were shaped by revolutionary upheavals – the English Civil War, the “Glorious” British revolution of 1688, the American Revolution, the French Revolution of 1789-92, and transformations imposed on the Low Countries by French revolutionary bayonets between 1792 and 1800 – that permanently restricted absolutist power and opened up social advancement to people of modest means. By contrast, those societies that failed to undergo democratic transformations prior to the opening decades of the nineteenth century – Spain, Italy, Germany and Russia – experienced more problematic paths to modernity. Democracy, it appears, has proven a more useful hand-maiden for modernity than Calvinism.

One of the problems confronting a defender of modernity and industrialisation is the ease with which critics can point to the human suffering that its advance entailed. In this, modernity has been no different from all other episodes of human progress. As Braudel observed, throughout history the “price of progress” was “social oppression. Only the poor gained nothing, could hope for nothing.”<sup>27</sup> This was as true of enserfed feudal Europe as it was of ancient Rome, where material production rested on slave labour. As modernity advanced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, mass misery was its companion. In the Scottish highlands, crofters were driven from the land. In Ireland, famines drove immigration. In the Americas and Australasia, First Nations people faced permanent dispossession. Modernity, however, differed from previous episodes of human “progress” in that it not only offered the poor hope, it actually delivered on that promise, often within a single generation. Among the first to suffer and benefit were Britain’s children. Initially, British factory owners scoured the orphanages for child recruits to undertake the disciplined and monotonous tasks that adults, accustomed to the comparative independence of farm and craft work, were reluctant to accept. As mechanisation took hold, however, children were found to be ill-suited to factory work, which increasingly demanded literacy and formal training. By 1851, only 30 percent of English and Welsh children worked. Of those that did, only 15.4 percent of males and 24.1 percent of females were found in factories. Not only were a majority spared childhood work for the first time in human history, they were also excused the pre-mature death rate that Rousseau had identified as an essential condition of human existence. As a result, 40 percent of the English population was under 15 years of age by 1851.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Weber, *General Economic History*, 367.

<sup>26</sup> Daniel Wren, *The Evolution of Management Thought*, (New York, NY: Ronald Press, 1972, 35). Note: this was the first edition of this book. It is currently in its seventh edition. This wording does not appear in the most recent editions.

<sup>27</sup> Fernand Braudel (trans. Sian Reynolds), *The Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, Vol. 2 (New York, 1975), 725.

<sup>28</sup> Peter Kirby, “The transition to working life in eighteenth and nineteenth-century England and Wales”, in Kristoffel Lieten and Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk (Eds.), *Child Labour’s Global Past, 1650-2000*, (Bern, Switz.: Peter Lang, 2011), 122-24.

Females were also early victims and beneficiaries of industrialisation. As the labour historian, E.P. Thompson noted in *The Making of the English Working Class*, the “abundant opportunities for female employment ... gave women the status of wage-earners”. Among the labouring population, for the first time, the “spinster”, “the widow”, and “the unmarried mother” had the opportunity to free themselves from reliance on male relatives and / or the parish poorhouse.<sup>29</sup> Nor should the working population be seen as mere passive victims and beneficiaries of modernity. Rather, they were seminal in its creation. In church “Sunday schools”, workers taught themselves and their children how to read. Religious education, most particularly that associated with the non-Conformist sects (Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists), also emphasised values of sobriety, self-improvement and discipline that equipped their members for material success. At a time when social security was non-existent, membership of Friendly and Mutual Societies not only provided protection from sickness and injury, they also opened up the possibility of home ownership. Church and Friendly Society membership also trained workers in managing budgets, conducting meetings, public speaking and organising.<sup>30</sup> Although authorities long feared the revolutionary currents evident among industrial workers, in truth, as the Webbs observe, by the 1840s most union leaders accepted the economic logic of capitalism.<sup>31</sup> Far from opposing material progress, they sought instead their members’ contribution to economic growth by fostering craft skills and improving workplace conditions. Modernity is, in short, a condition that prospers not through acquiescence but rather through popular engagement.

### **The Postmodern Assault on Rationality**

That postmodernism is hostile to rationality and to the continued pursuit of business endeavour and economic growth is freely acknowledged by its exponents. “The postmodernists aim”, we are advised, “is to pull the carpet out from under the feet of science and modernism”.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, “the presumed superiority of modern, industrial society” is dismissed as nothing but “a specifically Western prejudice.”<sup>33</sup> With Michel Foucault, the most influential of postmodern theorists, “the economic factor”, the idea that business endeavour and wealth creation are core social objectives, is dismissed in favour new “discourses”, the initiation of challenges against power wherever it exists, the “overturning of global laws”, and “the proclamation of a new day to come.”<sup>34</sup> Far from being a liberating force, modernity is depicted as entailing “new methods of power” and oppression; “methods that are employed on all levels and in forms that go beyond the state and its apparatus.”<sup>35</sup> Mere “obedience” is no longer enough. Instead, it is argued, a “normalization” of accepted values and power structures is demanded. We must, in short, think as well as behave as demanded.<sup>36</sup> As most readers would be aware, postmodernists inspired by Jacques Derrida also attack not only modernity but also the entire structure of Western language and thought. The premise that there are objective truths, discernible to inquiry and verifiable through testing, is rejected. Also dismissed is “the very distinction between real and imaginary events.”<sup>37</sup> “History”,

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<sup>29</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1963), 452-53.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 456-58.

<sup>31</sup> Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism, 1666-1920* (London, UK: 1920), 201.

<sup>32</sup> F.R. Ankersmit, “Historiography and postmodernism”, *History and Theory*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (May 1989), 142.

<sup>33</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*, (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1973), 1-2.

<sup>34</sup> Michel Foucault, Michel Foucault (trans. Robert Hurley), *The History of Sexuality – an Introduction*, (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1978), 7.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 89.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>37</sup> Hayden White, “The value of narrativity in the representation of reality”, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Autumn 1980), 10.

according to Hayden White, “is a place of fantasy”.<sup>38</sup> This means that all attempts to record human occurrences are, if not fiction, at least “fictive”, i.e. not only is the event being described capable of being subject to multiple “narratives”, each reader can interpret that narrative in different ways.<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, there are no identifiable patterns in societal outcomes. Nor can we discern causal relationships. As Keith Jenkins advised in a much cited study, “in postmodern terms, nothing connects.”<sup>40</sup> Such beliefs are not confined to philosophical and literary studies. They are also found among the most prestigious business and management journals. In an article published in *Academy of Management Review*, Rowlinson, Hassard and Decker “accept” the proposition that all “scientific writing” must necessarily, in part at least, be “fictive”.<sup>41</sup> Elsewhere, Novecivic, Jones and Carraher reject the idea that management can be understood on the basis of “positivist factual truth-claims”.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Drucker, Kipping and Whadwhani, writing in *Business History*, (where the former is Co-Editor), announce rejection of “the dominant science paradigm and its hypothesis-testing methodology”.<sup>43</sup>

Admittedly, despite shared hostility to modernity and the dominant strands of Western intellectual endeavour, postmodernism is fraught by division. Foucault, one postmodern scholar observes, notoriously refused “to retain one position for longer than the period between his last book and the next”.<sup>44</sup> All too often postmodernists make sweeping conclusions on the basis of little evidence. As Hayden White, perhaps the most significant postmodernist to emerge in the English-speaking world, observes in relation to Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization*: it is “a rambling discourse”, drawn from “a consideration of a very limited body of data.”<sup>45</sup> Relations between Foucault, the dominant voice in postmodernism, and his former student, Jacques Derrida, commonly regarded as the key exponent of poststructuralism, were often poisonous. Of all the critiques of Foucault’s highly influential study, *Madness and Civilization* – Foucault’s first major book<sup>46</sup> - none is more devastating than that undertaken by Derrida. In his book, *Writing and Difference*, Derrida correctly notes that Foucault sought to make “madness the subject of his book in every sense of the word ...

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<sup>38</sup> Hayden White, “The public relevance of historical studies: A reply to Dirk Moses”, *History and Theory*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (October 2005), 333.

<sup>39</sup> Alan Munslow, “Managing the Past”, in Patricia Genoe McLaren, Albert J. Mills and Terrance G. Weatherbee (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Management and Organizational History*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 139.

<sup>40</sup> Keith Jenkins, “Introduction: On being open about our closures”, in Keith Jenkins (Ed.), *The Postmodern History Reader*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 10.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Rowlinson, John Hassard and Stephanie Decker, “Research strategies for organizational history: A dialogue between historical theory and organization theory”, *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (2014), 257.

<sup>42</sup> Milorad Novecivic, J. Logan Jones and Shawn Carraher, “Decentring Wren’s Evolution of Management Thought”, in Patricia Genoe McLaren, Albert J. Mills and Terrance G. Weatherbee (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Management and Organizational History*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 13.

<sup>43</sup> Stephanie Decker, Mathias Kipping and R. Daniel Whadwani, “New business histories! Plurality in business history research methods”, *Business History*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (Jan. 2015), 33.

<sup>44</sup> Gibson Burrell, “Modernism, postmodernism and organizational analysis: The contribution of Michel Foucault”, in Alan McKinlay and Ken Starkey (Eds.), *Foucault, Management and Organization Theory*, (London, UK: Sage, 1998), 15.

<sup>45</sup> Hayden White, “Foucault decoded: notes from underground”, *History and Theory*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1973) 38.

<sup>46</sup> Note: The book started life as Foucault’s PhD thesis, *Folie et Déraison: Histoire de La Folie à l’âge Classique*. An abridged version was then published in English as Michel Foucault (trans. Richard Howard), *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1965). Following Derrida’s critique an expanded version was published as Michel Foucault (trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa), *History of Madness*, Second Edition, (London, UK: Routledge, 2006).

its first person narrator, its author, madness speaking about itself.”<sup>47</sup> Having set this goal, Foucault then uses logic and rationality to uncover the nature of madness. “Everything transpires” in Foucault’s study, so Derrida observes, as if Foucault knew, “in a continuous and underlying way”, what madness entailed. Such a goal, Derrida concluded, was itself “madness”.<sup>48</sup> In taking this course of action, Derrida claimed, Foucault was engaged in not only a “structuralist” and “historicist style”, he also ran “the risk of being totalitarian”.<sup>49</sup> In response, Foucault studiously ignored Derrida’s key criticisms, choosing to simply delete the original Preface that Derrida had eviscerated from subsequent editions, published under the new title of *History of Madness*. Instead, he chose to engage in his own evisceration of literary deconstruction, “a system”, so Foucault recorded, “of which Derrida is today the most decisive representative, in its waning light.”<sup>50</sup> This system, he continued, involved not only the elevation of “textual traces” to an undeserved status, but also “the invention of voices behind the text”. Literary deconstruction was therefore, he warned his readers, “A pedagogy which teaches the student that there is nothing outside the text ...that it is never necessary to look beyond it.”<sup>51</sup>

Many of the core postmodern claims do not survive elementary scrutiny. Without exception, postmodernists (heirs to Foucault) and poststructuralists (heirs to Derrida) deny the existence of universal laws, claiming instead that the human experience is one of disconnected “events”, in which individuals and groups constantly reshape the world in a “living, fragile, pulsating ‘history’.”<sup>52</sup> Accordingly, the history of business organisations is one of “flux, with continual crises, conflicts and dilemmas.”<sup>53</sup> Yet, at the same time, we are told that power “is everywhere”, that it pervades “the entire social body” in ways that are more oppressive than in the past because, in part, “power and knowledge are joined together”.<sup>54</sup> Logically, given the supposed fluidity of history and the human experience, one would expect some examples of organisations and / or societies where oppressive structures of power and authority have been broken down. That no such examples are readily provided indicates that not only are postmodernism’s emancipatory claims mere chimeras, but that the whole postmodern tradition is caught in the sort of universalist, deterministic mindset that it readily condemns in others. Foucault’s core claim that modernity is based on power over the soul, of demands for “normalisation” - rather than the cruder and in many ways more preferable control of the body in the pre-modern era – also does not survive elementary scrutiny.<sup>55</sup> In the Middle Ages, enforcement of religious belief and its accompanying code of behaviour, were all pervasive. Failure to attend Mass regularly exposed one to accusations of heresy, a capital offence. Recent postmodern claims that “management” did not exist before the 1870s, being instead a mere “modernist mode of employment”, also does not bear scrutiny. Supposed proof for this radical suggestion is found in the fact that neither an 1857 book, *Work and Wealth: Maxims for Merchants and Men of Business*, nor a *Business Man’s Handbook* issued in 1901 by the American International Correspondence Schools, mentioned “management”.<sup>56</sup> A more extensive reading would, however, have found plentiful

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<sup>47</sup> Jacques Derrida (trans. Alan Bass), *Writing and Difference*, (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2001), 39.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 49, 39.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 69-70.

<sup>50</sup> Michel Foucault, “Appendix II – My body, this paper, this fire”, in Foucault, *History of Madness*, 573.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 573.

<sup>52</sup> Michel Foucault (trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith), *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, (New York, NY: Pantheon, 1972), 11.

<sup>53</sup> Peter Clark and Michael Rowlinson, “The treatment of history in organization studies: towards an ‘historic turn’?” *Business History*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (July 2004), 341.

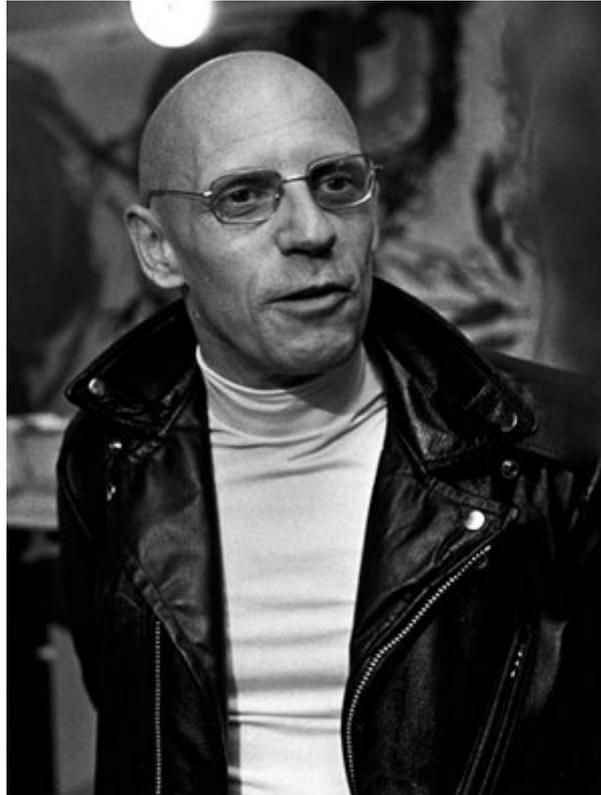
<sup>54</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 93, 100.

<sup>55</sup> See, Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, Chap. Ix (The Birth of the Asylum), 241-78

<sup>56</sup> Roy Jacques and Gabrielle Durepos, “A history of management histories: Does the story of our past and the way we tell it matter”, in Patricia Genoe McLaren, Albert J. Mills and Terrance G. Weatherbee (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Management and Organizational History*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 97.

indicators; indicators evidenced – among others - in Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Ure's *Philosophy of Manufactures* (1835), Lardner's *Railway Economy in Europe and America* (1850) and the annual series published Henry Varnum Poor, *Manual of the Railroads of the United States* (first released in 1868).<sup>57</sup> Indeed, from being a novel concept in 1870, the formulation has been around for centuries. If anyone can lay claim to be the initiator of the concept in the English language it is John Florio who – as an article by Jeff Muldoon and Daniel Marin demonstrated – used the term in his *The World of Wordes* in 1598 after extensive dealings with Italian merchant bankers.<sup>58</sup>

### Michel Foucault



*Michel Foucault, 1926-84: A French philosopher and the dominant influence in postmodernism, Foucault changed his focus from one book to the next, but remained a pre-eminent critic of modernity. (Courtesy: Flickr)*

Given the evident failings of postmodernism, why then should we concern ourselves with its dictates? Reason is found in the all too easily overlooked strengths of postmodernism; strengths that correspond to the weaknesses of most social science disciplines, most particularly in the business and management domains. Two strengths stand out. The first of these, postmodernism's claim to be the prophet of emancipation, is one that has been acquired as much by historical accident as by the endeavours of its adherents. With the discrediting of Marxism following the fall of the Soviet Union, and

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<sup>57</sup> Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 700; Andrew Ure, *Philosophy of Manufactures: An Exploration of the Scientific, Moral and Commercial Economy of the Factory System of Great Britain*, (London, UK: Charles Knight, 1835); Dionysius Lardner, *Railway Economy in Europe and America: The New Art of Transport*, (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1850); Henry V. Poor, *Manual of the Railroads of the United States, 1868-9*, (New York, NY: H.V. & H.W. Poor, 1868).

<sup>58</sup> Jeffrey Muldoon and Daniel B. Marin, "John Florio and the introduction of management into the English vocabulary", *Journal of Management History*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2012), 129-36.

embrace of free market economics by the world's social democratic and Labor parties, postmodernism finds itself as virtually the sole theoretically-informed social critic left standing. As the British socialist Terry Eagleton bemoaned more than 20 years ago, much "of postmodernism's power" stems from the simple "fact that it exists".<sup>59</sup>

In assuming the mantle as preeminent global critic of not only market capitalism but all forms of power inequalities, postmodernism benefits from the passion and genuineness with which its proponents approach their task. Among older postmodernists many boast not only a long career of activism, but still lay claim to the "socialist" tradition that inspired their initial forays.<sup>60</sup> Among younger postmodernists, their passion and commitment to a more equitable world is self-evident, both when one reads their work and when one meets them in person. Among those who feel embarrassed by the negative legacies of European and American colonialism, as well as among those who still suffer its ill-effects, it is difficult not to be attracted by claims that "emancipatory potential ... lies in questioning the eurocentricity" of current Western knowledge and scholarship.<sup>61</sup> Perceiving power inequalities and oppression in every field of endeavour, postmodernism likewise attracts the disaffected everywhere: ethnic minority groups, refugees, gays, lesbians and transgender individuals. Foucault's idea that "bio-power" was "without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism" appeals to feminist critiques.<sup>62</sup> Among disaffected groups, the influence of postmodernism is witnessed not only in the university class room but also in the media, where journalism has been reshaped by the postmodernist domination of cultural and media studies departments. It is also found in the street, and in political campaigns waged around "identity politics". Among academics – a relatively privileged job category – there is attraction in the idea, to cite prominent two prominent organisational studies' theorists, that modernity has merely created "boring and shitty bureaucratic organizations"; organisations that are now a supposed shadow of the halcyon university departments of the past.<sup>63</sup> There is also attraction in the idea that, in opposing a Dean's request to teach a new course, or relocate to another campus, one is engaged in what Foucault referred to as "a plurality of resistance, each of them a special case."<sup>64</sup>

Unfortunately for those who put their faith in its emancipatory claims, and who dedicate their lives to furthering its promises, postmodernism is a false prophet. Unlike Marxism – which, for all its faults, saw the wealth potential of modern capitalism as a precondition for social advancement – postmodernism has espoused ceaseless resistance to the ideals of economic development and productive efficiency. As Jean-Francois Lyotard, a figure who first articulated the concept of postmodernism, argued, "development" is the core modernist "ideology"; an ideology that requires the "enjoyment of humanity ... be sacrificed to the interest of the monad in expansion".<sup>65</sup> Although Foucault demonstrated a masterly understanding of classical economics in *The Order of Things*, this represents a relatively rare postmodernist foray into the realm of economics.<sup>66</sup> Subsequently, postmodernists have chosen to abjure economics in favour of studies of organisational

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<sup>59</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1996), ix.

<sup>60</sup> See, for examples, Michael Rowlinson, "Revising the historic turn: a personal reflection", in Patricia Genoe McLaren, Albert J. Mills and Terrance G. Weatherbee (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Management and Organizational History*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 70-80.

<sup>61</sup> Gabrielle A.T. Durepos and Albert J. Mills, *ANTI-History: Theorizing the Past, History, and Historiography in Management and Organization Studies*, (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2012), 131.

<sup>62</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 140-41.

<sup>63</sup> Michael Rowlinson and Chris Carter, "Foucault and history in organization studies", *Organization*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2002), 540

<sup>64</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 96.

<sup>65</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard (trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachael Bowlby), *The Inhuman*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 6, 67.

<sup>66</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1994), Chap. 6 (Exchanging), 166-214.

power, thereby marginalising themselves in the debates about wealth creation and economic policy that remain central to our world. Postmodernists also damage their emancipatory credentials by abjuring verifiable analysis in favour of stylised narratives about power, as Gibson Burrell does when he declares that: “History is about lies not truth. It is a struggle for domination acted out in a play of wills.”<sup>67</sup> Such formulations - which consciously draw on Nietzsche’s contention that what “ultimately” counts “is to what *end* a lie is told”<sup>68</sup> - are misguided not only intellectually but in their practical effect. For where there are social inequalities they are best redressed through their representation, not their misrepresentation.

The second strength of postmodernism is theoretical, an ability to attack the underlying methodological and conceptual principles of social science disciplines that non-postmodernists are either unwilling or incapable (or, more likely, both) of refuting. Indeed, the typical non-postmodernist response typically resembles that recently recounted to me by an American management historian, who advised, “That when I hear someone use the term postmodernism, I roll my eyes and walk away.” As in any other contest, a battle in which only one party is actively participating can have only one result. When a non-postmodernist, confronted with the philosophic idealism of postmodernism – which holds that there is no object reality, that every perception is conditional, that all accounts are subjective – does offer a counter, the first temptation is to appeal to the material reality of the world, i.e. objective reality can be determined by the senses. In taking this stance, it is the non-postmodernist who is in error. Often, the senses deceive, telling us, for example, that the sun moves across the sky even as our place of abode remains still. A marginally superior response is to appeal to some accepted “authority”, most notably Karl Popper, leading to the citation of phrases such as “there can be no statements in science which cannot be tested, and therefore none which cannot in principle be refuted, by falsifying some of the conclusions which can be deduced from them.”<sup>69</sup> While most of us will have no qualms with accepting this proposition, reliance on Popper in the battle against postmodernism is akin to fighting a battle with tactics and weapons drawn from a previous war. For the key driver of Popper’s philosophy was opposition to the “universalism” of Marxism, which depicted historical outcomes as ones that are shaped by deterministic economic laws rather than human action. On this front, postmodernists are even more hostile to “universal” explanations than Popper, leaving the non-postmodernist bereft in defence of “abstract” economic and social determinants such as “supply” and “demand”.

Postmodern attacks on the theoretical foundations of disciplines are often dressed up in deceptive clothing. This is seen in recent post-modernist calls for a “historic turn” in organisational studies;<sup>70</sup> a domain central to not only undergraduate studies at most universities but also academic employment. The launch of this so-called “historic turn”, largely drawn from British-based postmodernist academics, was both puzzling and disingenuous. Puzzling, because it studiously ignored - or, in the case of company histories, summarily dismissed - a rich vein of prior and co-existing organisational history; work that included McKinlay and Starkey’s edited study, *Foucault, Management and Organization*

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<sup>67</sup> Gibson Burrell, *Pandemonium: Towards a Retro-Organization Theory*, (London, UK: Sage, 1997), 21-22.

<sup>68</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche (trans. R.J. Hollingdale), *The Anti-Christ*, (London, UK: Penguin Classics, 1990), 187.

<sup>69</sup> Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), 25.

<sup>70</sup> Alfred Kieser, “Why organization theory needs historical analysis – and how this should be performed”, *Organization Science*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Nov. 1994), 608-20; Rowlinson and Carter, “Foucault and history”, 527-47; Clark and Rowlinson, “Treatment of history”, 331-52; Charles Booth and Michael Rowlinson, “Management and organizational history: prospects”, *Management and Organizational History*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2006), 5-30; Rowlinson, Hassard and Decker, “Research strategies for organizational history”, 250-74; Decker, Kipping and Whadwani, “New business histories”, 30-40.

*Theory*.<sup>71</sup> Disingenuous, because the call for a turn to “history” did not mean, as one would assume, a study of the ways in which organisations have employed staff and resources, pursued various production and marketing strategies, or dealt with increased competition. Rather, it represented an assault on the “foundational” and “epistemological” principles that had previously shaped the discipline; an assault that called for “the general displacement of ‘the Scientific Attitude’” and of “the view that organisation studies should constitute a branch of the science of society.”<sup>72</sup> Central to this assault was a “deconstruction” of seminal works in the field. Alfred Chandler’s pioneering work was dismissed as “functional”, treating only “consequences, such as greater efficiency”. Oliver Williamson’s insightful articulation of transaction cost economics was declared an illegitimate intruder, an agent of “economic imperialism” within the discipline. Studies that “prioritised” market forces, or which expressed support for the “efficiency” principle” were declared incompatible with “both historical and ethical considerations.”<sup>73</sup> Clearly, such attacks on the foundations of a discipline cannot be effectively countered by the publication of yet another empirical study, but only by a carefully reasoned theoretical defence.

The postmodernist assault on their intellectual opponents takes three main forms, each corresponding to different stands of thought within postmodernism / post-structuralism. First, there are studies that draw on the Foucault’s “later” works, most particularly the *Discipline and Punish* and *History of Sexuality*; works that, as we have noted, portray both the exercise of power and consequent resistance as existing “everywhere.” This framework is typically used for either writing postmodern empirical studies that highlight power and resistance, or in deconstructing non-postmodern studies not characterised by these themes. It has little utility when it comes to challenging existing, non-postmodernist theoretical frameworks. In this latter task, Foucault’s “early” works - most particularly, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, originally published in 1966 as *Les Mots et les Choses*, and the subsequent *The Archaeology Knowledge*, first published in 1969 - provide a more useful if intellectually unwieldy weapon. In these two works, Foucault argues a number of philosophically idealist positions: that “at any given moment in time, there is always only one *episteme* that defines the condition of all knowledge”; that knowledge cannot be understood apart from language; that language “is, wholly and entirely, discourse”; that written discourses have their own existence separate from the author; that understanding of the human condition is best obtained not by considering humans as social objects but rather by an examination of their “discursive practice”; that a “discursive formation” always contains “multitude dissensions”.<sup>74</sup> It was these formulations that gave postmodernism its most distinctive forms. As Hayden White observed in one of the first English language studies of Foucault, the key task for those inspired by his work was the “unmasking, demystification, and dismemberment ... of Western thought”.<sup>75</sup> In his own book, *Metahistory*, published in 1973, White transformed and developed the complex, opaque writings of the early Foucault into a more accessible and usable form. Indeed, among English-language academics, it can be argued that it is White - rather than Foucault - who has proved the most influential figure. In *Metahistory*, and his subsequent works, White contended that - as all previous studies had been shaped by various “emplotments” that were, in truth, ideological rather than factual - there was need for a new form of “narrative” writing. This, White argued, had to take the form of “myth”, inspiring and emancipating, breaking down illusionary barriers between fact and fantasy.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Alan McKinlay and Ken Starkey (Eds.), *Foucault, Management and Organization Theory*, (London, UK: Sage, 1998).

<sup>72</sup> Clark and Rowlinson, “Treatment of history”, 331.

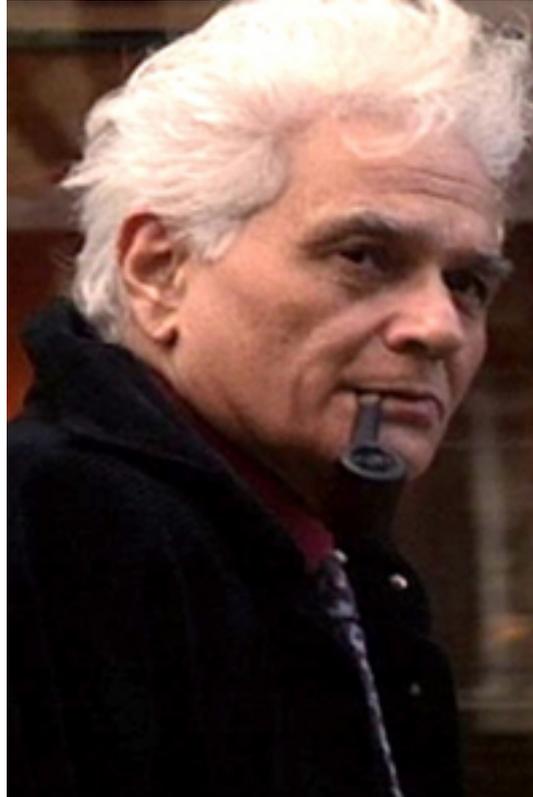
<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 337.

<sup>74</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 168, 86-87, 94, xiv, xx-xxi; Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 155.

<sup>75</sup> White, “Foucault decoded”, 26.

<sup>76</sup> White, *Metahistory*, White, 372-73; “The value of narrativity”, 5-27; Hayden White, “The politics of historical interpretation: Discipline and de-sublimation”, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 89, No. 1 (Sept. 1982),

## Jacques Derrida



*Jacques Derrida, 1930 – 2004: A critic and former student of Foucault, Derrida was the most radical and logical of postmodern thinkers in his attacks on modernity, reason and the underpinnings of Western knowledge. (Courtesy: Flickr)*

The third and most radical form of postmodernism – poststructuralism or literary deconstructionism – represents both a development and repudiation of Foucault. According to Derrida, Foucault had erred in highlighting the “breaks” or “discontinuities” within the *epistemes* of Western thought since the Renaissance. Rather than there being multiple *epistemes*, Derrida identified a “fundamental permanence of the logico-heritage”, a heritage based on “Reason” that can be traced back to Plato and the ancient Greeks.<sup>77</sup> To free the human spirit from the universal “order” that Reason had imposed, to undertake a “revolution against reason”, language had to be first freed from the “order” and “structure” in which it had been imprisoned throughout Western history.<sup>78</sup> In this Derrida was rejecting not only the “structural linguistics” of the early twentieth century Swiss scholar, Ferdinand de Saussure, but also the long-held view in European thought, first articulated by Plato, that “the written discourse” is a mere image of human thought and of “living language”.<sup>79</sup> In doing so, Derrida was arguing, far more radically and aggressively than Foucault, for the freeing of written language from the meanings imposed on it; a freeing that would allow the extraction of

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113-37; Hayden White, “The historical text as literary artefact”, in Brian Fay, Philip Pomper and Richard T. Van (Eds.), *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings*, (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 15-33.

<sup>77</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 46-47.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 42.

<sup>79</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure (trans. Wade Baskins), *Course in General Linguistics*, (New York, NY: Fontana Collins, 1974); Plato (trans. R. Hackforth), *Phaedrus*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 159.

“traces” of memory, “traces” of “difference” from the cloak of censorship that had always been enforced – either through self-censorship or external mandate on writing.<sup>80</sup>

In pursuing the logic of postmodernism to its most logical ends, Derrida reveals postmodernism as a foe not just of modernity but of rationality. Its purpose is not simply one of redressing the inequalities created by market capitalism. Rather, it is the declared enemy of “Western thought” and “Reason”, an intellectual tradition that has sought – with a considerable measure of success – to use rationality to create a richer and better world.<sup>81</sup> This is, in short, a battle worth fighting. We cannot simply roll our eyes and walk away.

### **In Defence of Reason**

One of the worst effects of the postmodernist assault on rationality, and of the validity of “scientific research”, is lost belief in the capacity for human progress and advancement. More than 20 years ago, Paul Gross noted that “rejection of reason is now a pattern to be found in most branches of scholarship and in all the learned professions.”<sup>82</sup> Pessimism, of both the intellect and the will, now pervade research in the business and management disciplines. On the one side we are informed that “scholarship has no distinctive claim on epistemic truth; its truths are [mere] language”.<sup>83</sup> On the other we are told that “the future is one of gloomy uncertainty. It now seems incredible that anyone could have ever believed in the hierarchy of master narratives like liberalism, science, Marxism, socialism”.<sup>84</sup> If social science research is to advance, if society is to advance pessimism of purpose must be dispelled. This can only occur if there is an active defence of reason and science.

Much of the opposition to scientific methods in the social sciences is based on confusion and false premises. Part of the problem, as E.H Carr noted, comes from “an eccentricity of the English language”, where terms such as “natural science” and “social science” are commonplace. By contrast, people rarely speak of “historical” or “literary” science. This is a very different situation to German, where the equivalent term, “wissenschaft”, applies to any organised body of study or science that involves systematic research, including not only “naturwissenschaft” (natural science) but also “geschichtswissenschaft” (science of history).<sup>85</sup> Confusion also stems from mistaken conceptions of scientific research as applied in the natural sciences; confusion evident in the distinctions provided by the historical “deconstructionist”, Alun Munslow, who states that history – and by implication, the other social sciences - is not “scientific in the sense that we understand the physical sciences to be” because it is not “an experimental and objective process producing incontrovertible facts”.<sup>86</sup> Such observations about the “natural sciences” are, however, now at least a century out of date, their redundancy sounded in 1902 by Henri Poincare’s *La Science et L’hypothese* (Science and Hypothesis). Outlining for the first time the theoretical principles of modern science, Poincare (1905: 156, 158) observed that although “experiment is the sole source of truth”, the facts observed in any scientific experiment were unlikely to “be repeated” in that exact observable form.<sup>87</sup> “All that can be affirmed” in science, therefore, “is that under analogous circumstances an analogous fact will

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<sup>80</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 253, 184-85.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 2. Also, Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xxii-xxiii, 317

<sup>82</sup> Paul R. Gross, “Introduction”, in Paul R. Gross, Norman Levitt and Martin W. Lewis (Eds.), *The Flight from Science and Reason*, (New York, NY: New York Academy of Sciences, 1996), 2.

<sup>83</sup> Sande Cohen, *Passive Nihilism: Cultural Historiography and the Rhetorics of Scholarship*, (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 2.

<sup>84</sup> Alan Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, (Abington, UK: Routledge, 1997), 17

<sup>85</sup> E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 50.

<sup>86</sup> Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 5.

<sup>87</sup> Henri Poincare (trans. William John Greenstreet), *Science and Hypothesis*, (New York, NY: Walter Scott Publishing, 1905), 156, 158. Note: Poincare’s *Science and Hypothesis* was first published in French in 1902.

be produced.”<sup>88</sup> There are no unchanging and unchangeable laws. Instead, observed Poincare, we have “hypotheses” through which we can make predictions only based on “probability”; hypotheses that must, moreover, be subject to constant verification, correction and, where necessary, abandonment.<sup>89</sup> Significantly, similar comments were made by Hobbes in the mid-seventeenth century when he drew, for the first time, the distinction between the “natural sciences” and what he called “politics and civil philosophy”. In both realms, Hobbes wrote, “No discourse whatsoever can end in absolute knowledge of fact, past or to come.” Instead, “in science”, all knowledge is “conditional”.<sup>90</sup>

As social scientists we are - using Poincare’s outline of “scientific method”— no different from the astronomer in the “natural sciences”. Like astronomers, we search for patterns and meanings in a universe that is in constant motion. As with astronomers, some of the key relationships that we seek to ascertain are only hinted at by the effects of as yet unseen forces. Sometimes the evidence presented before us will lead us in mistaken directions. Yet even when rational consideration of the evidence is proven by subsequent observation and experimentation to be wrong, we should, Poincare recommends, “rejoice”. For if a hypothesis that was founded upon “all the known factors” is shown to be in error, then “we are on the point of finding something unknown and new”.<sup>91</sup>

This book is not, of course, the first to critique postmodernism. It is preceded, among others, by Eagleton’s *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Callinicos’s *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique*, Norris’s *The Truth About Postmodernism*, and *The Flight from Science and Reason*, edited by Gross, Levitt and Lewis.<sup>92</sup> In writing this book, however, this call to arms, it is therefore intended to give readers not only a sense of the intellectual roots of postmodernism, its strength and fallacies, but also – more importantly – a clearer sense of the intellectual roots of modernity. Upon this, it is hoped, a more active and informed defence of reason will be built.

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 158.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 167-68, 159.

<sup>90</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 40, 30.

<sup>91</sup> Poincare, *Science and Hypothesis*, 168.

<sup>92</sup> Eagleton, *Illusions of Postmodernism*; Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1989); Christopher Norris, *The Truth About Postmodernism*, (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1993); Gross, Levitt and Lewis (Eds.), *The Flight from Science and Reason*.