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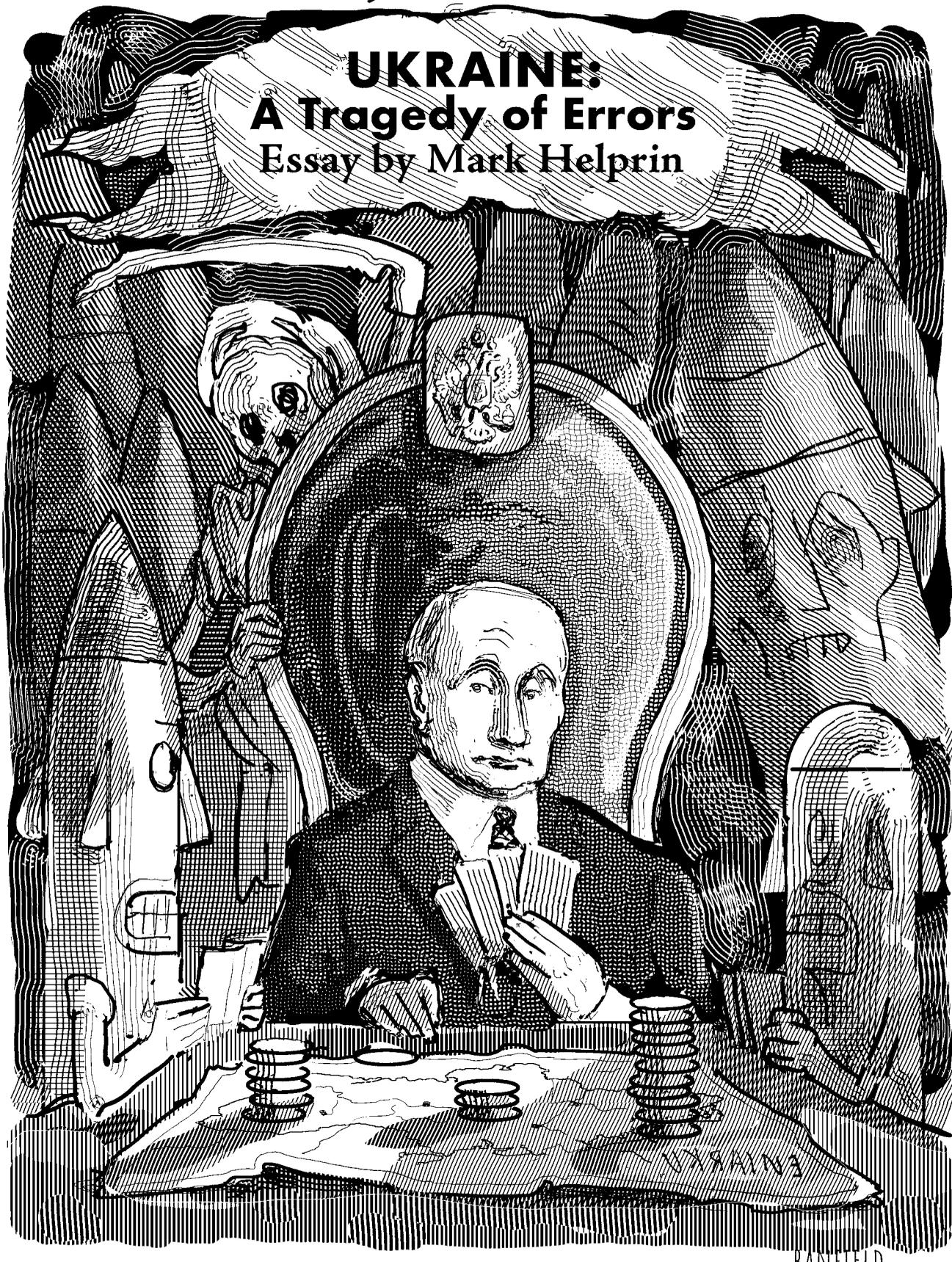
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Essay by John M. Ellis

WHAT DOES POSTMODERNISM REALLY AMOUNT TO?

Even its practitioners don't know.



IF YOU WANT TO KNOW WHAT POSTMODERNISM is, or just what the word means, you don't get much help from either its advocates or interpreters. Most words that label theories bear some relation to their content: words like "evolution" or "Communism" give you at least the beginning of an understanding of what they are about. But words, like "modernism," that refer only to an unspecified time have the drawback not only of omitting any kind of descriptive content, but also of allowing the passage of time to make their meaning increasingly uncertain. "Postmodernism" is doubly uninformative, referring only to an unspecified period that came after a prior time that is just as indeterminate.

How do its advocates meet this difficulty? They are as evasive as the word itself, mostly claiming that it's hard to define or even undefinable. This equivocation is found even in sources that ought to be definitive. In *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* (2000) author David Macey can only tell us that "[t]he term is applied, quite loosely, to a wide variety of cultural practices and theoretical discourses associated with the practice of postmodernity." Note the circularity: postmodernism is about postmodernity. For Fredric Jameson, whose bulky volume *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) earned him the Modern Language Association of America's James Russell Lowell Prize, "[i]t is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think his-

torically in the first place." If that doesn't quite satisfy you, he goes on to say that it "may then amount to not much more than theorizing its own condition of possibility." Which tells us that even postmodernism's best-known expositor flounders when trying to explain what it is he's writing about.

It's worth noting how odd this is. When theories are proposed, their advocates are eager to explain exactly what they achieve and why they are so important. Not so with postmodernism. Over time postmodernism has taken within itself a number of well-worn ideas that already had a long history: skepticism, cultural relativism, the shortcomings of rationality. Yet it's not clear that it has anything new to say about those ideas, and as we'll see, they are completely inconsistent with it in any case. It has incorporated Marxist ideas too, notably the identification of power as the most important aspect of the relations between people. But again, whether coherent or not, this is not an idea that is original with postmodernism.

Misreading the Past

THERE ARE, HOWEVER, TWO ISSUES that postmodernists cite most often when staking their claim to revolutionary importance and originality: first, they claim to have uncovered the unreliability of science; and second, the unreliability of meaning in language. What can we say about postmodernism's contributions in these two areas?

Postmodernism argues against the "foundationalism" exemplified by René Descartes, who located the test of certainty in the individual's intuition: "Whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive is true." A strong impression was both the guarantee of scientific knowledge and a basis upon which to build.

Postmodernism questions this conception of scientific knowledge, but the problem here is that a great deal had already happened since Descartes, and postmodernists seem not to know much about it. Already a hundred years before postmodernism—in 1868—Charles Sanders Peirce published a series of powerful criticisms that make postmodernism's ideas on the subject look weak and superfluous.

Peirce said that to make any individual's conviction a touchstone of truth was pernicious. One person's ideas can only be on probation until they meet with the agreement of the community of scientists. They can therefore only be in the nature of a hypothesis. Descartes's theory of knowledge proceeded by piling up known facts that we can be certain of, like building blocks. Each new one was added to the existing pile. But in Peirce's account it's always possible that new knowledge may change our understanding of existing knowledge.

When Peirce makes hypothesis so central to inquiry, he certainly isn't undermining scientific knowledge. On the contrary, his is a much better, because more realistic, account of how science develops. It certainly doesn't entail the general skepticism about scientific



knowledge claimed, for example, by the postmodernist Jean-François Lyotard, who advocated incredulity toward all such “meta-narratives.” Peirce put paid to that attitude in a devastating riposte. He argued that generalized doubt was impossible, because when we doubt something our doubt is grounded in specific knowledge. If you doubt a theory, it will be because you know something that causes your doubt. If you are skeptical of Darwinism and people ask you why, they’ll expect a specific reason for your doubt, and they won’t be satisfied with a theoretical rejection of all scientific narratives. Indiscriminate doubt is nothing but empty posturing. After Peirce, it’s hard to see any substance in what postmodernism has to say about science.

What of the instability of meaning in language? This derives from Jacques Derrida’s reading of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. (In the 1970s and ’80s, Derrida’s standing among academic humanists was extraordinary.) Saussure used the word “arbitrary” to describe the relation between the sound shape of a word and its meaning. So far, he’s stating a commonplace: the sounds making up “tree” could just as well be other sounds with the same meaning. But Saussure also used that word “arbitrary” to refer to something else that is far from commonplace: he used it in connection with the relationship between word meanings and the things to which they relate.

Derrida and his followers completely misunderstood what Saussure was saying here. They then went on to build their own theory of language on the basis of that misunderstanding. Take a simple example: A thermometer records a temperature of 68 degrees Fahrenheit. Seemingly, there’s nothing arbitrary about that. But someone who uses a Celsius thermometer reads off 20 degrees. Which one is right? The answer is that if you use Celsius, 20 is right, and for Fahrenheit, 68 is right. But now suppose that we ask the question, what is the *real* temperature? That is, one that doesn’t use an arbitrary scale. To which the answer is: there is no such thing. The choice of one system or another is certainly arbitrary, but both give real information. The arbitrariness of the choice of systems doesn’t make readings any less precise. Note that even if there were only one system—say, Fahrenheit—the same arbitrariness would remain, and that is Saussure’s point. You can’t talk about temperature without an arbitrary system of measurement. This is what Saussure meant when he said that in language there are no positive terms (i.e., terms whose meaning can be defined without differentiation from other terms) but only differences.

Saussure was rejecting the reference or naming theory of meaning—that words simply name things and then refer to them by means of the name. Peirce had already observed that to know something is to classify it or relate it, to know it as this rather than that. The later Ludwig Wittgenstein had reached the same point. Both he and Saussure used the same analogy, that of games, and they used it in the same way, one that had nothing to do with playfulness. (The postmodernists misunderstood that, too.) The point of the analogy is that in a game, the rules limit you to a choice of this move rather than that. The choices are finite. Languages also deal with an infinite reality by means of limited choices between a finite set of terms. (I discuss this question further in my book *Language, Thought and Logic* [1993].)

Derrida’s misreading of Saussure was catastrophic. Because he misunderstood what Saussure meant by this second sense of “arbitrary” Derrida jumped to the conclusion that meaning becomes unreliable and indefinite.

A new fad in literary criticism offers the possibility of saying something new without the need for original thought.

This mistake was amplified by Derrida’s stylistic habit of dramatic verbal exaggeration. And so, for him, the absence of a reference that exists independent of language (what he called the “transcendental signified”) extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely. Meaning becomes indefinite, limitless, indeterminate. The play of signifiers is endless. But of course Saussure’s point was exactly the opposite—that the meaning of a term is created by its place within a system of terms and is specified within that system. The fact that we can’t refer to a temperature without an agreed system of terms doesn’t make meaning indeterminate; it’s how meaning is made precise to the extent we want it to be.

What, then, can we say about Derrida’s contribution to this still ongoing scholarly discussion of how meaning in language works? There isn’t one. Derrida knew virtually nothing about linguistic theory or the philosophy of language, and what he did know he garbled so completely that his account is worthless.

Thus, postmodernism’s two most vaunted contributions to knowledge both evaporate as soon as they are analyzed. Add to this the fact that other theories which postmodernism adopted—skepticism, relativism, power in human relations—neither originated with nor were enriched by it, and it’s hard to find any significant original thought in postmodernism.

In their well-intentioned but flawed book *Cynical Theories* (2020) Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay assert that “[a] fundamental change in human thought took place in the 1960s” and that this “radically new conception of the world and our relationship to it”—postmodernism—“revolutionized social philosophy and perhaps social *everything*.”

Nothing could be further from the truth. There are no original ideas in postmodernism, and outside the campuses its influence has been minimal. It has revolutionized nothing. That, however, is not the end of the story. It’s certainly possible to say what postmodernism amounts to. Postmodernism involves a sequence of three different groups of people with three very different motivations. It begins with one group for a particular set of reasons, is then taken over by another whose purposes are completely different, and finally is absorbed by a third who has still entirely different reasons for doing so.

Fads and Fashion

THE FIRST GROUP IS FRENCH WRITERS in the decades after World War II, who were reacting against the context of that time in France. It was an unusual time. Since about the 1920s throughout the English-speaking world there had been a vibrant debate in many areas of humanistic study, notably in literary studies, philosophy, and linguistics. Little of this had reached France. Traditional literary history still prevailed, and analytic philosophy was virtually unknown. Gustave Lanson’s *Histoire de la Littérature Française*, though written in the 19th century, was still influential well after the war. The Ministry of National Education controlled school syllabi, standards, teacher training—in fact, everything that mattered—from the center. One classroom was pretty much like the rest. The highly centralized, regimented educational system didn’t encourage new thought.

The distinct reaction among French intellectuals to this static situation was well captured by Leo Bersani in *Partisan Review* in 1967 when he described it as the “arrogant frivolity” of French intellectual life. Arrogant, because intellectuals felt themselves to be above this deadening conformity. And frivolous, even

playful, as a counter to bourgeois education's plodding, unimaginative seriousness. Roland Barthes was an early example who came to prominence in the 1950s. Yale professor Peter Brooks's description of Barthes in a 1982 article for the *New Republic* not only captures Barthes himself, but much of French intellectualism of this and the following decades:

He detested all forms of authority.... His temperament and intellectual style were elegant, abstruse, refined, slightly mandarin. He could be assertive, always in the mode of counter-statement, affirming the inverse of society's accepted dogmas and myths.

Part of the reaction against the poverty of imagination was a conscious effort to display a super-abundance of it. Around the early 1980s I arrived in Paris and on checking in to my hotel was astonished to find that three of the four TV channels available in my room were running intellectual talk shows. These all followed the same pattern: intellectuals were expected to spin out a stream of dazzling and increasingly far-fetched ideas. The more they soared above everyday common sense, the better. This was, in effect, intellectual entertainment.

If we set such leading "postmodern" figures as Lyotard, Derrida, and Michel Foucault against this background, what is most obvious is not how original they are, but on the contrary how much they conformed to this model of intellectualism.

Lyotard's incredulity toward all meta-narratives was reactiveness and nothing more. Peirce's dictum is still relevant: rejection of a specific idea or practice takes thought and knowledge, but rejection of everything on principle is only a self-important intellectual's pose of superiority to the common herd.

Derrida was the consummate intellectual entertainer: his writing is full of surprising, paradoxical turns, as he constantly generates verbal complexities and somersaults. His aim was clearly to dazzle. His misreading of Saussure almost seems designed to give legitimacy to his extravagant verbal flights, for in him we do indeed see the limitless play of meanings.

Some aspects of Brooks's description of Barthes seem especially relevant to Foucault: "He detested all forms of authority...he could be assertive. Always in the mode of counterstatement...affirming the inverse of society's accepted dogmas." Automatic rejection of common dogmas and customs is no less mindless than automatic reliance on them—perhaps more so, since existing customs have

at least stood the test of experience for a while. In this way, Foucault is the godfather of the "defund the police" movement. We've seen now in soaring crime rates the danger of indiscriminate hostility to all existing customs and dogmas.

France is the country of fashion, and the vogue of these writers might not have lasted very long but for the fact that a second group of people now enters the picture: English-speaking academics of the 1970s and '80s. Their context could not have been more different from the first group. What appealed to them was Derrida's deconstruction, and for a very specific reason.

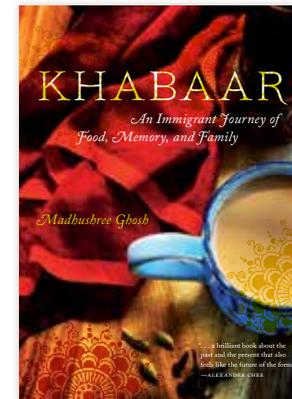
The years 1965-75 saw a massive expansion of higher education in several countries. In the United States, for example, enrollment in public higher education went from slightly less than 4 million students to nearly 9 million. New institutions were quickly created, and existing ones greatly expanded. There was a sudden, mad scramble to find a huge number of new junior level college professors—more than the number that already existed, and many times more than were normally hired in a single decade. Inevitably, quality suffered. It was obvious that most of these newcomers to the profession could not have made it through the appointment process at any other time.

Yet once hired, these new entrants into the profession were expected to produce original thought in their fields. Many of them simply couldn't do so. The problem was at its worst in the humanities, because while new discoveries in the natural sciences open doors to new research questions, every new book on William Shakespeare makes it harder to find something new to say about him. That is why college humanists are prone to fads and fashion in research. A new fad in literary criticism offers the possibility of saying something new without the need for original thought. And so we get feminist readings of Shakespeare, psychological readings, sociological readings, and so on. But even by the standards of those particular fads, Derrida's "deconstruction" offered extraordinary new opportunities. The infinite play of meaning meant that a great classic could hint at all kinds of things that had never been seen in it before. A favorite tactic was to make a text say the opposite of what it seemed to say on the surface. By loosening critical commentary from the constraints of what the author actually said, academic critics who lacked originality could seem to achieve some semblance of it. This is surely why Derrida became at this time the most influential figure in literary studies in the English-speaking world.

Khabaar

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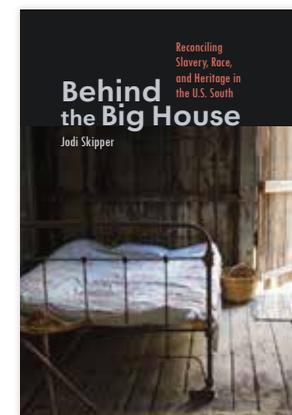


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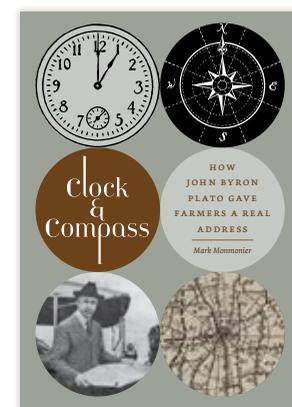


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A P.R. Problem

AT FIRST, LITERARY DECONSTRUCTIONISM was not political. In my experience at that time the people who adopted it were mostly bookish careerists. They didn't disparage the classic writers as dead white males with lamentable values, but simply used deconstruction as another way of contributing to literary criticism of those writers. During the years of literary deconstruction's heyday, however—from about 1970 to 1990—hard Left political activists were slowly building their numbers on the campuses. These constituted the third group that first infiltrated, and by 1990 had completely taken over, postmodernism.

The transition might simply have been a slow absorption of one group by the other but for the fact that at the end of the 1980s deconstruction suffered a series of shocks that induced its practitioners suddenly to throw in the towel. First, it was discovered that Paul de Man, by far the most prominent of Derrida's followers in the U.S., had been a vocal Nazi collaborator in occupied Belgium during World War II. Second, deconstructionism's basic logic was increasingly questioned—my own *Against Deconstruction* (1989) was an example—and the leading deconstructionists were unable to answer the logical objections leveled at it. And third, David Lehman's *Signs of the Times* (1991) was a devastating account both of the de Man affair and of the morally disgraceful attempts by Derrida and his allies to whitewash de Man's Nazism.

Several prominent deconstructionists now announced that they had done enough with it and were moving on to something else. But there was no explanation given the graduate students they had been programming. The loudest, most enthusiastic deconstructionists simply slunk away quietly through the back door.

The hard Left political activists who then became the core of postmodernism were in many ways a bad fit for it. It was noted for skepticism, but they were harshly dogmatic. It was relativist, but they were completely committed to leftist radicalism. It was hostile to grand narratives, but theirs was in their minds the grandest of all narratives. What then made them embrace a position so incompatible with their own in so many respects? The answer lies in the fact that they had one overwhelming liability, something that always stood in their way. Their problem was, and still is, that when stated plainly and directly Marxism doesn't sell well—on the contrary, it repels.

If radicals state plainly their major aims—for example, the overthrow of capitalism—people are apt to remember the misery of the Soviet Union, or of North Korea, or of countless other unhappy countries. It's for this reason that radical activists have become specialists in cozy euphemisms. They speak of "social justice" when what they really mean is abolishing free markets. They speak of "equity" when what they really mean is illegal and highly unpopular racial quotas. But even after labels have been sanitized in this way, they can't avoid talking about the practical steps that their agenda involves, and at that point another aspect of their acute P.R. problem emerges. Their arguments, again when baldly stated, immediately look crude and simple-minded. There's really no way to hide that fact that the "labor" theory of value is too primitive to be taken seriously, and that public ownership of the means of production and exchange immediately sounds ridiculous.

How, then, to make these radical arguments look like the result of deep, sophisticated thought? That's something that evidently worries radicals a great deal. In his *Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*, David Macey explains that "[t]he many variants of Western Marxism are much more sophisticated than

anything developed in the 'socialist' countries." In other words, we mustn't think that dimwits like Lenin, Stalin, Mao, or Castro are genuine representatives of Marxist thought—Marxism only reaches its full intellectual glory in the faculty lounges of Western universities. Macey returns to that word "sophisticated" over and over again. Terry Eagleton is so sophisticated, he tells us, and Fredric Jameson is the most sophisticated Marxist scholar of all. But something doesn't add up here, because Jameson is still a big fan of Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and Castro.

For radical leftists with the problem of how to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, postmodernism was a godsend. The French thinkers who started it all were masters at the art of using extraordinary verbal virtuosity to create the appearance of deep, complex thought. That was exactly what the radicals needed: they dressed up their wooden thought in what they hoped would pass for dazzling, super-sophisticated language.

But the absence of any real relationship between the surface verbal pyrotechnics and the simple-minded underlying thought was easily shown when in 1996 Alan Sokal wrote a hilarious parody that mixed postmodernist clichés randomly with the language of physics and submitted it to the journal *Social Text*—whose editorial board included Jameson and other postmodern luminaries. The journal published it as "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity." The editors couldn't distinguish an outrageous parody from their standard postmodernist fare. And that's why the postmodernists have such trouble defining what it is they do.

John M. Ellis is professor emeritus of German literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and chairman of the California Association of Scholars.

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