

THE TRUTH
ABOUT
THE TRUTH

De-Confusing and Re-Constructing
the Postmodern World

Edited by
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Introduction: What's Going On Here?

Some postmodern news items:

An American anthropologist visited Japan during the Christmas season and noticed that the retail merchants there had begun to take a great interest in the symbolism of Christmas. When he wandered into a large department store in Tokyo, he saw a striking example of this: a Christmas display that prominently featured Santa Claus nailed to a cross.¹

The Lapps of northern Finland have almost abandoned their traditional form of chanting, called "yoiking." But now some young Lapps are reviving it, learning the songs from the old people and holding public concerts. In the process, they experiment and improvise. One group put on a concert with a rock band, combining yoiking with hard rock. They are also developing an electronically augmented form, called "techno-yoik."²

Fashion editors say "the religious look" is hot: clothes that resemble monastic robes, jumpers with giant crosses stitched into the design, rosary necklaces. A jewelry designer reports a strong demand for Stars of David, but also a brisk trade in "basic crosses," Russian Orthodox crosses, Maltese crosses and ankhs. A fashion show in Germany unveiled a collection inspired by nuns' habits. An Italian collection featured the "Hasidic look," with female models wearing long side curls and wide-brimmed felt hats.³

In the 1990 census, almost 10 million Americans created a giant statistical headache by refusing to identify themselves in terms of any of the standard categories. They insisted on being listed as "other race." Some of the dissenters were of highly mixed backgrounds, some just didn't like to be

pigeonholed. An official said the whole system will probably have to change: "Basically what you're asking is a person's judgment of their race or ethnicity. And people's perceptions of themselves and their answers can change from census to census."⁴

What is it that is going on here—here and everywhere—that produces such a burst of cultural chaos and creativity, such rampant pluralism? What gives so many people a feeling of permission to tinker with the hallowed symbolic heritage of societies—mixing rituals and traditions like greens in a salad, inventing new personal identities, revising old political ideologies, picking and choosing what to believe and what not to believe? Is there a pattern that links such diverse events as the collapse of Communism, the information/communications revolution, the doctrinal civil wars within organized religions and the restless spiritual and cultural wanderings of the educated and affluent?

The message of this book is that there is—that we are in the midst of a great, confusing, stressful and enormously promising historical transition, and it has to do with a change not so much in *what* we believe as in *how* we believe.

People rarely understand or even notice great historical transitions as they take place; it is said that Louis XVI, at the end of the day the Bastille fell, wrote in his diary *Rien*, "Nothing happened." Revolutions of belief are even more elusive, because they take place within human minds. You don't always know what's going on, even when it is your own mind that has been the scene of the upheaval. It's quite possible, for example, to go from seeing science as absolute and final truth to seeing it as an ever-changing body of ideas—a bigtime shift, any philosopher will tell you—without feeling that anything special has happened, without losing all confidence in scientific facts: For all practical purposes the speed of light remains 186,000 miles per second, gravity still makes water run downhill, and ontogeny goes right on recapitulating phylogeny. It's equally possible to move from seeing a religion as timeless truth to seeing it as the product of a certain culture—and still happily worship at your church or temple.

People all over the world are now making such shifts in belief—to be more precise, shifts in belief about belief. They are not, of course, always doing it effortlessly. It's true that some people scarcely notice the difference when they cease to regard their society's beliefs as absolutely the last word,

but that same change feels to many like a great liberation, and to many others like a grievous loss. It can be profoundly troubling, or it can be painfully threatening. However it feels, it happens. It happens because we are charging headlong into a new era: a time of rethinking and rebuilding in which beliefs about belief are shaken as never before, a time in which issues once left to the philosophers—such as the nature of truth—become matters of vital everyday importance to ordinary people. When you think about your personal beliefs and values, when you make decisions about your religious life, when you worry about whether or not to conform to the customs of your society or community—even when you consult your most fundamental sense of who and what you are—you are taking an active part in this transition.

LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD

The word commonly used to describe this era is “postmodern”—a puzzling, uppity term, seeming to imply that the modern era, which we have always equated with all that is new and progressive, has reached the age of retirement. I first noticed it in Stephen Toulmin’s book *The Return to Cosmology*. Toulmin said:

We must reconcile ourselves to a paradoxical-sounding thought: namely, the thought that *we no longer live in the “modern” world*. The “modern” world is now a thing of the past. Our own natural science today is no longer “modern” science. Instead . . . it is rapidly engaged in becoming “postmodern” science: the science of the “postmodern” world, of “postnationalist” politics and “postindustrial” society—the world that has not yet discovered how to define itself in terms of what it *is*, but only in terms of what it has *just-now ceased to be*.⁵

Postmodern is a makeshift word we use until we have decided what to name the baby. It is a word of looking back. But what is it, exactly, that we are looking back *at*? What is it that the world has just now ceased to be?

One of the best answers was offered by David Harvey of Oxford University in his book *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Harvey defined postmodernity as the situation in which the world finds itself after the breakdown of the “Enlightenment project,” which lasted from the latter part

of the eighteenth century until well into the twentieth. That was the project aimed at getting all the world's diverse peoples to see things the same way—the rational way. The thinkers of the Enlightenment, Harvey said, “took it as axiomatic that there was only one possible answer to any question. From this it followed that the world could be controlled and rationally ordered if we could only picture and represent it rightly. But this presumed that there existed a single correct mode of representation which, if we could uncover it (and this was what scientific and mathematical endeavors were all about), would provide the means to Enlightenment ends.” The Enlightenment—and the twentieth-century scientific rationalism that grew out of it—was not only a philosophical effort, then, but an ideology of progress: a belief in “linear progress, absolute truths, and rational planning of ideal social orders.”⁶

Another book you're likely to hear quoted wherever anybody tries to define postmodern is Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*. Lyotard, a French philosopher, was commissioned by the Council of Universities of Quebec in the late 1970s to do a study on the state of knowledge in the Western world. He said in his report that all modern systems of knowledge, including science, had been supported by some “metanarrative” or “grand discourse” about the main direction of history.

A metanarrative is a *story* of mythic proportions, a story big enough and meaningful enough to pull together philosophy and research and politics and art, relate them to one another, and—above all—give them a unifying sense of direction. Lyotard cited as examples the Christian religious story of God's will being worked out on Earth, the Marxist political story of class conflict and revolution, and the Enlightenment's intellectual story of rational progress. (For Americans, Manifest Destiny was once a great metanarrative; for colonial powers, the theme of taking up “the white man's burden” served a similar purpose.) He proceeded to define the postmodern era as a time of “incredulity toward metanarratives”—all of them.

Lyotard didn't mean that all people have ceased to believe in all stories, but rather that the stories aren't working so well anymore—in part because there are too many, and we all know it. He took Yeats' famous “the centre cannot hold” a step farther: He said there are a lot of centers, and none of them holds. Instead, we are exposed to a babble of diverse and contradictory fragments of stories, and the arts and sciences go their various ways.⁷

Lyotard's argument was in some ways a subtle and difficult one, but it

is not hard to get a sense of what a multistoried world looks and sounds like. All you have to do is turn on your nearest television set and flip randomly from channel to channel: Listen to the religious prophecies, the political messages, the forecasts of ecological and/or economic doom just a commercial break away from cheerful promises of brighter tomorrows. Notice that with each channel you briefly enter the subculture of another ethnic group, another age level, another profession or interest or lifestyle. Consider the impact of a similar array of messages being beamed to every part of the world—people everywhere being bombarded by the sermons, the commercials, the vivid images of other people living quite different kinds of lives.

You get a better perspective on the present situation by contrasting it not only to the just-ending modern era, but also to the premodern—to life in isolated tribes, small villages, early city-states. In premodern societies, most people lived within the context of a single coherent cultural package. Premodern societies weren't necessarily simple or primitive, but people in them were relatively free from the "culture shock" experience of coming into contact with other people with entirely different values and beliefs—the kind of experience that, in contemporary urban life, you're likely to have a couple of times before lunch.

The long march out of premodernity was a series of culture shocks—another step taken each time somebody made the unsettling discovery that the same world could contain multiple worldviews. Different people have done quite different things when they made that discovery: Conquerors frequently tried to kill off the wrong thinkers. Missionaries tried to persuade or force them to convert to the correct view of reality. Philosophers tried to create systems of understanding so profound—so super-human—that they might be offered to the world as more than just another culturally-based set of beliefs. Some people place the roots of modernism as far back as the time of Socrates and Plato, who were engaged in just such a project of searching for essential truths, deeper and more durable than those embodied in the myths of their tribal gods.

Over the past few centuries, various great belief-systems—philosophical, religious, political and combinations thereof—have flexed their muscles in the world. The modern era has been a time of battles between religions, between religion and science, between political ideologies. And although each of these had its own inventory of essential truths, none has been able to gain universal agreement that those truths were all that true.

It doesn't look like we are about to become all Christians, all Marxists, all Muslims, all cool modern rationalists.

I'd sum it all up this way: People in premodern, traditional societies had an experience of universality but no concept of it. They could get through their days and lives without encountering other people with entirely different worldviews—and, consequently, they didn't have to worry a lot about how to deal with pluralism. People in modern civilization have had a concept of universality—based on the hope (or fear) that some genius, messiah or tyrant would figure out how to get everybody on the same page—but no experience of it. Instead, every war, every trade mission, every migration brought more culture shocks. Now, in the postmodern era, the very concept of universality is, as the deconstructionists say, “put into question.” The old strategies of conquest, repression and conversion are still being strenuously applied in many places—labeled now by nifty euphemisms like “ethnic cleansing”—but they aren't very effective. It begins to look like we're all going to have to get used to a world of multiple realities.

Postmodernity, then, is the age of over-exposure to otherness—because, in traveling, you put yourself into a different reality; because, as a result of immigration, a different reality comes to you; because, with no physical movement at all, only the relentless and ever-increasing flow of information, cultures interpenetrate. It becomes harder and harder to live out a life within the premodern condition of an undisturbed traditional society or even within the modern condition of a strong and well-organized belief system. All the major-league belief systems are still around, but all of them are in some kind of postmodern trouble: internal civil wars. Believers commuting in and out. Innovators creating strange new variations—free-market Communism, feminist Christianity, New Age science.

We are living in a new world, a world that does not know how to define itself by what it is, but only by what it has just-now ceased to be.

AN “ISM” FOR OUR TIME

And, although it seems a bit nitpicky, I think it's useful to make a distinction between postmodernity and postmodernism—the first being the time (or condition) in which we find ourselves, the second being the various schools

and movements it has produced. So far, I have been talking mostly about postmodernity.

I have noticed, over the years that I have been traveling and discussing these matters with various groups, that it's a lot easier to get agreement about the -ity than the -ism. The word "postmodernism" is floating around rather freely these days, and it means different things to different people. To some, it means funny architecture; to others, French intellectuals you can't understand; to still others, anything weird, campy, trendy or high-tech. Some people equate it with the idea that all values and beliefs are equal.

Postmodernisms—their way paved by the psychedelic, academic, racial and political upheavals of the 1960s—began to catch the attention of culture-watchers in the early 1970s. America was being invaded at about that time by the works of French intellectuals such as Michel Foucault, whose "archaeological" studies showed how earlier civilizations had constructed new concepts—about madness, for example—that also gave rise to new systems of power. Through the 1980s and 1990s more and more people have become familiar with some form of postmodernism—either by taking the high road through academia, where its ideas are endlessly pondered in the lecture halls and the dormitories; or by taking the low road through popular culture, where they are reflected in movies, music and fiction. Currently, postmodern thought is entering into a new growth phase linked to the explosion of information and communications technologies, the global mass-media economy of images, the ever-increasing determination of many men and women to reconstruct traditional ideas about sex and gender.

Many people fervently hope that postmodernism—whatever they mean by it—will go away. And a lot of them are going to get their wish: Styles will change, of course. Some of the intellectual movements that have landed at the top of the academic pecking order will be deposed; this appears to be happening to deconstruction already. The radical relativism of the sort I described earlier doesn't have to go away, because it was never here. Nobody really believes that everything is equal, because the human mind doesn't work that way; whatever else it is doing, it is always tirelessly, relentlessly evaluating.

Postmodernisms will come and go, but postmodernity—the post-modern condition—will still be here. It is a major transition in human history, a time of rebuilding all the foundations of civilization, and the world

is going to be occupied with it for a long time to come. And, although it touches different people in vastly different ways, it is happening to us all. We are all emerging from out of the security of our tribes, traditions, religions and worldviews into a global civilization that is dazzlingly, overwhelmingly pluralistic.

Surrounded by so many truths, we can't help but revise our concept of truth itself: our beliefs about belief. More and more people become acquainted with the idea that, as philosopher Richard Rorty puts it, truth is made rather than found.⁸ This idea itself is not exactly new. It came into the Eastern world with Buddhism about 2,500 years ago, and into the Western world at about the same time with Heraclitus. It has been the message of various mystics and philosophers over the centuries. It is like a minor theme in a symphony that is heard at first faintly in the background and eventually swells into dominance.

Seeing truth as made, not found—seeing reality as socially constructed—doesn't mean deciding there is nothing “out there.” It means understanding that all our stories about what's out there—all our scientific facts, our religious teachings, our society's beliefs, even our personal perceptions—are the products of a highly creative interaction between human minds and the cosmos. The cosmos may be found; but the ideas we form about it, and the things we say about it, are made. One of the main themes of postmodern thought is that language is deeply involved in the social construction of reality. Rorty says: “We need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that truth is out there. To say that the world is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states. To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations.”⁹

Postmodern thought is closely linked to the “linguistic turn” in philosophy—the growing consensus that ideas cannot be understood apart from the language systems that produced them—and to recent research on the human brain and nervous system. No serious postmodern thinker believes that reality is constructed by an effortless whim: It is a complex and in many ways still mysterious process. It involves minds and bodies, cool

thoughts and hot passions, personal experiences and the collective history of humanity. It is very closely related to the activities we call play, art, craft, poetry, theater. But—whatever you emphasize—we come to see that no truths in the world are, so to speak, untouched by human hands.

So we find all kinds of men and women at work—some flying a “postmodernist” flag and some not—trying to define the present situation, explain it, exploit it, make it go away or figure out what we should do about it.

Some people study the reality-construction process: Cognitive scientists and neuroscientists analyze the workings of the individual brain/mind as it assembles the chaotic raw data of sensory perception into meaningful experience. Anthropologists and sociologists learn how different societies create different values and beliefs, myths and rituals, laws and institutions.

Psychologists such as Kenneth Gergen focus on postmodern experience—on how it *feels* to live amid such a rich, often contradictory barrage of cultural stimuli; what it does to us and what kind of people we become. They say the postmodern individual is a member of many communities and networks, a participant in many discourses, an audience to messages from everybody and everywhere—messages that present conflicting ideals and norms and images of the world. Gergen believes that this condition (he calls it *multiphrenia*) is the major psychological problem of our time—but also possibly the birth-pangs of a new kind of human being.¹⁰

In literature and the arts, we have critical theorists who insist that when you experience a work of art you don't simply take in the artist's intention, but actively participate in creating whatever meaning or message you find. You are also the artist.

In the world of religion—or, to be more accurate, in the many worlds of religion—people are overhauling doctrines right and left. How could it be otherwise? If you regard the various truths and practices of a religion as socially constructed—created by certain human beings according to the needs (as they perceived them) of certain times—you are likely to feel free to reconstruct them according to the needs (as you perceive them) of the present time. This may mean ordaining gays, creating ecological rituals, declaring God to be female or going ahead and making up a whole new religion. It may also mean quietly and privately deciding to override certain teachings such as prohibitions against birth control. Other religions are

similarly troubled: there are Islamic futurists and feminists, new variations of Hinduism and Buddhism—and, in each religion, fundamentalists who are desperately striving to keep the old faith.

And so it goes through every field of human knowledge, though high culture and low. We see postmodernity on the streets in the behavior of people who are learning to live multiethnic lifestyles; we see it in the wild diversity of pop culture. We see it in politics in many ways—one of them being a striking shift from conflict *between* belief systems to conflict *within* belief systems: between innovators and traditionalists in the organized religions, between revisionists and Marxist reactionaries in the post-Communist world.

FOUR CORNERS OF THE POSTMODERN WORLD

This is a huge transition—one that I think has barely begun—and it doesn't lend itself to simple summaries. But as an introduction to this book I will point out four main dimensions of it:

1. *Self-concept*. Instead of forming our ideas of who and what we are on the basis of the “found” identity fixed by social role or tradition, we begin to understand ourselves in terms of the “made” identity that is constructed (and frequently reconstructed) out of many cultural sources.

2. *Moral and ethical discourse*. We move from the “found” morality of a single cultural and/or religious heritage to the “made” morality forged out of dialogue and choice. We don't become relativists of the sort that are supposed to make no judgments. Instead, we become the kind of relativists—described by contributors to this book as constructivists, ironists or post-modern humanists—who know that when we do make our judgments we're standing on the ever-shifting ground of our own socially constructed cultural worldviews.

3. *Art and culture*. No style dominates. Instead we have endless improvisations and variations on themes; parody and playfulness. Postmodern architects are unabashedly eclectic and call attention to it. People everywhere similarly combine traditions, borrow rituals and myths. All the world's cultural symbols are now in the public domain, and Santa Claus is on the cross.

4. *Globalization*. For the first time in human history we have a truly global civilization. It is a civilization of rapid information exchange and unprecedented mobility. We shouldn't be surprised that, in it, many people begin to see their various tribal ways for what they are, and take them a bit less seriously. Nor should we be surprised that they also want to hold onto their tribal ways if they find them satisfying—and maybe grab a few of some other tribe's ways while they're at it. It is a civilization continually changing form, with unstable boundaries. People now see borders of all kinds as social constructions of reality and feel free to cross them, erase them, reconstruct them.

The selections in this book are all, in one way or another, about the postmodern world. They aren't all in agreement, of course, and they don't always speak the same language. You will encounter some splendid examples of postmodernist jargon. You will find some selections by people who write about the postmodern world without ever using the term "postmodern." You will find some strong critiques of various aspects of postmodernism.

Whatever their bias, they are all contributions to one of the most painfully challenging and yet absolutely essential tasks of human life—trying to understand our time while we are in it.

This time is, for all its jangle, complexity and dissonance, a moment of great beauty and opportunity. We glimpse new ways of thinking about ourselves, new possibilities for coexisting with others—even profoundly different others. We begin to feel a sense of ownership of our worldviews and identities. My own feeling about this time is a hopeful one. I believe that such works as these, taken together, do more than describe the world in terms of what it has just now ceased to be. They also help us understand the world in terms of what it is struggling to become.

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Four Different Ways to Be Absolutely Right

WALTER TRUETT ANDERSON

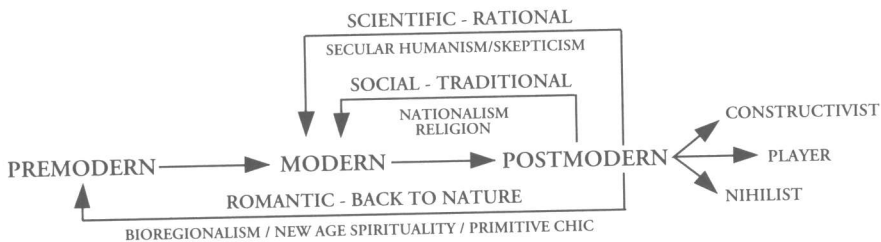
This is my own mapping of postmodern society, pointing out a kind of diversity that is often overlooked when people talk about pluralism.

In pluralistic societies such as ours there are lots of differences, and there are also different sorts of differences. You can begin to talk about diversity by making a list of the various races and religions, for example, but that doesn't give you the whole picture. You also have to take note of the differences between men and women, and between the young and the old. And then there are also different worldviews—fundamentally different ways of thinking and talking about truth—that cross-cut all those categories. The progressive-orthodox polarization described by James Davison Hunter is one useful way of getting at this, but a slightly more complex view is called for.

Contemporary Western societies have at least four distinguishable worldviews. People who share one of these communicate fairly well with one another, not so well with people of a different worldview. Each worldview forms a somewhat distinct culture within society—each with its own language of public discourse, its own epistemology.

These four worldviews are (a) the postmodern-ironist, which sees truth as socially constructed; (b) the scientific-rational, in which truth is “found” through methodical, disciplined inquiry; (c) the social-traditional in which truth is found in the heritage of American and Western Civilization; and (d) the neo-romantic in which truth is found either through attaining harmony with nature and/or spiritual exploration of the inner self. Each of these has its own set of truths, and its own ideas about what truth *is*—where and how you look for it, how you test or prove it.

We can picture this multireality society—and get a better idea of what is going on in today’s world—with the help of the following diagram. Here the arrows indicate a general line of cultural evolution, from premodernity through modernity to postmodernity:



The postmodern-ironist worldview is shown (in three variations) along the leading edge.

The scientific-rational and social-traditional worldviews are conservative attempts to pull back from postmodernity. They seek to hold onto the values of a modern civilization that is now beginning to look kind of shaky.

Neo-romanticism—expressed in many forms of New Age spirituality and radical environmentalism—is even more strongly oriented toward the past: Neo-romantics reject both the postmodern and the modern, and long for a fantasized golden era before the Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment.

Because life on the front lines of postmodernity is still so varied and so much in flux, postmodernists are not easy to identify as a single group. The diagram shows three subgroups—distinct ways that people are plunging into a world in which truth is not found, but made: These three types of

postmodern explorers don't much resemble one another outwardly, but they share a readiness to see reality as social construction.

The first group is composed of people who are actively engaged in thinking through and living a constructivist worldview: Among its leaders are philosophers such as Richard Rorty and Thomas Kuhn; sociologists of knowledge; symbolic anthropologists; constructivist cognitive scientists, psychologists and psychotherapists; constructivist women and feminist scholars; and liberal theologians. You are not likely to recognize any of these people on the street, or to notice anything outrageously postmod about the way they dress or act. In this regard they're like Abraham Maslow's "self-actualizing" subjects, who tended to be outwardly conventional. "The expressed inner attitude," Maslow wrote, "is usually that it is ordinarily of no great consequence which folkways are used, that one set of traffic rules is as good as any other set, that while they make life smoother they do not really matter enough to make a fuss about."¹

A second and much larger group is composed of people who manage to surf along fairly satisfactorily on the currents of cultural change without taking much interest in abstract ideas or any self-conscious "postmodernism." These are the postmodern players, and their irony is more an attitude or sensibility than an intellectual position. They browse among cultural forms, play mix-and-match with all the pieces of our various heritage. They invent new religious rituals, combine folk music with hard rock, dabble in nostalgia for the 1950s or 1960s. They explore virtual reality, regard clothing as costume, and feel right at home in theme parks.

The third group is made up of the nihilists of the postmodern era, the people who see that there are many conflicting beliefs in the world, and conclude that, since these can't possibly *all* be true, they must all be phoney. A fairly logical position, when you think about it. This new nihilism is most evident in the punk rock subcultures, where the irony is dark and heavy. You can hear it in songs that shout defiance at the conventional pieties and embrace the pleasures or pains of the moment—which are, in their way, at least trustworthy. The nihilists offer a vivid example of what it is that conservatives fear about postmodernity, and predict that it must inevitably lead to: alienation, hedonism, ridicule and contempt for mainstream society.

Scientific-rationalist culture is most strongly entrenched in academia and the sciences, but its representatives are everywhere. You can find its ideas

expressed in magazines such as the *Skeptical Enquirer* and *The Humanist*—vigilantly on guard against flaky irrationality in all its forms; anxious to expose the frauds and hucksters among the fundamentalists, the astrologers, the mind readers and the faith healers. For a good scientific rationalist, the main sources of evil in the world are sloppy thinking and lack of respect for hard facts. If you want to see the scientific-rationalist culture in action, drop in sometime at the annual convention of CSICOP, the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Para-normal.

If you want to get an eloquent statement of the social-traditional point of view, hunt up Allan Bloom's successful book of a few years back, *The Closing of the American Mind*. Bloom's book is a diatribe against the relativism that, he believes, has taken over the minds of youth and the mainstream of academia. He pleads for a rediscovery of the classic truths to be found in the great literary and philosophical traditions, and, looking back, sees the fifties as an intellectual golden age that was destroyed by the intellectual flakiness of the sixties.² Bloom's idea of what we need, however, is not more dry scientific rationalism, but more study of the treasures of Western civilization: the Founding Fathers, the philosophers, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, and—most of all—the wise men of ancient Athens.

The scientific-rational and the social-traditional cultures cling together, in an occasionally quarrelsome coexistence, as the power structure. The official mainstream realities of our time are to be found there. The alliance is weakened by such controversies as the debate between evolution (a keystone of the scientific worldview) and creationism (a stubborn remnant of what was once the central belief of Western civilization)—but, on the whole, scientific rationalism and social traditions support one another. Their alliance formed the twin pillars of modern civilization, and their basic position is that the center can—and damned well better—hold.

So, if you aspire to become President of the United States, you would do well to demonstrate that you are firmly rooted in traditional American culture. Act like a white, middle-class family man and show up in church once in a while. You don't want to be seen as too postmodern or too neo-romantic: Do not say in public that you think truth is socially constructed. If you meditate, keep it a secret. If you want to win an argument, let people know that your side is supported by scientific findings. Numbers are especially good. Even religious fundamentalists use science, whenever possible,

to “prove” the truth of their beliefs; it is the *lingua franca* of public discourse, spoken (although in different accents) by all groups.

But although scientific rationalism and social tradition carry a lot of political and social clout, they don’t show much vitality or creativity. Modernism, as Jurgen Habermas observed, is dominant but dead. If you want to look for signs of life, you are likely to find it somewhere out on the fringes of postmodernity, or among the neo-romantics.

The growth of the neo-romantic culture in recent years has been nothing short of spectacular. It obviously expresses not only a deep disaffection for modern civilization but also a reluctance to take on the uncertainties of postmodernism. It has most of the features of earlier romanticism—the reverence for nature, the personal-development preoccupation bordering on narcissism, the mystique of the noble savage—but these appear in much-updated forms: environmentalism, spirituality, movies such as *Dances With Wolves*.

The differences among these various cultures become clearer as you examine their ways of thinking about specific issues. Consider, for example, the matter of the self. How do you find your true self? Is there such a thing? For the neo-romantic, there definitely is—and there is no question but that this is an *inner* true self, something that you may be able to discover through meditation or introspection. For a scientific-rationalist, the instructions are exactly the opposite: Look outside yourself to get the truth—the objective facts—about what kind of a person you are; go to an expert, take a bunch of tests, and get the real You—your personality, your intelligence, your aptitudes—on a computer printout.

For a social-traditionalist, the true self is to be found in society, specifically in social roles: You “become somebody” by performing adequately in the roles that your culture has institutionalized, that great people in the past have modeled for you, and that other people respect and understand: doctor, lawyer, statesman, entrepreneur, husband, wife.

For the postmodernist there is no true self. Whatever you might call by that name is merely the momentary reflection of bodily states, the environment, all the inputs of culture, ideas about what a self might or should be—and the language you are using. The self makes no sense apart from its context. Kenneth Gergen writes: “As the self as a serious reality is laid to rest and the self is constructed and reconstructed in multiple contexts, one enters

finally the stage of the *relational self*. One's sense of individual autonomy gives way to a reality of immersed interdependence, in which it is relationship that constructs the self."³ Constructivists are not terribly interested in conversations about individualism vs. community, because they don't think there is any such thing as an individual, and if you push them far enough you find they're not all that sure there is really any such thing as a community either—if by community you mean a single social context that completely overrides all the other social contexts through which we pass in the course of a day or a lifetime.

Constructivists think roles are good, useful tools for making a society work and giving people a sense of identity, but are likely to remind you that all roles are reified social behaviors. People created them, and sometimes other people need to re-create or even discard them.

Postmodern players base their self-concepts on lifestyle more than social role, and this accounts for some of their changeability. Roles may exist for decades, even centuries, without altering much; but lifestyles come in and out of fashion, and rarely outlive the people who adopt them. Most 1960s hippies, for example, are still around; they just aren't hippies anymore. Meanwhile the punk subculture appears to be growing a bumper crop of new lifestyles, with distinctions and nuances that outsiders do not comprehend and can't even keep track of.

This four-way mapping grew out of numerous workshops I have done with different groups of people, and in the process we have traced many sets of issues—international politics, ideas about nature, ideas about ethics and morality—as they appear to people of different worldviews. We have noted that the culture wars are not a simple polarization between two groups. The skirmish lines cut in different directions on different issues.

The map is a useful construct, but a few reminders are in order: One is that it *is* a construct, a way of looking at the world. The map is not the territory. Another is that the territory—Western civilization in the closing years of the twentieth century—is not standing still. The ground isn't solid under anybody's feet.

By positioning the postmoderns out on the leading edge I indicate that they are the wave of the future, the people you want to study to see where the world is going. This is precisely what I believe and want to communicate, but I don't think this means casually dismissing the values of the other

worldviews. In a way we are all postmoderns—all moving into a new and quite different world. And I am coming to believe that the key to survival and success in this world will not merely lie in becoming a good constructivist: It will have to do with an ability to be multilingual. The functioning person in the postmodern world needs to be able to think rationally and understand science, able to appreciate and draw on a social heritage, and able as well to drink from the well of ecological and spiritual feeling that is being tapped by neo-romanticism.

Once, when we were having a discussion about this, somebody said: “What we’re looking at here isn’t just a map of the culture—it’s a map of the mind.”

Which, of course, it is. Culture and consciousness always reflect one another, and the mind of every person living in a contemporary society must have some access to each of the four worldviews. The difference is in which one predominates, and how comfortably you can move from one to another. Some people seem to be completely organized around one way of understanding truth, are deeply threatened by the others, and repress their own tendencies to wander into the forbidden worlds of postmodernism or neo-romanticism. Others of us appear to be much more multilingual.

What is happening now, I believe, is not simply that some trendy postmodernism is taking over the world and obliterating the cultures of rationalism, tradition and romanticism. Rather, the inner voice of the postmodern ironist is becoming a part of everybody’s psychological makeup. As that happens, people, often without quite noticing it, go about their business in subtly different fashions. If we learn to hear that voice in a constructive (and constructivist) way, it becomes a guide to living in today’s multi-worldview world.