



# 6

## Postmodernism

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Introduction	92
Postmodernity as a new historical period	92
Postmodernism as a critical way of understanding modernity	93
The emergence of the third debate in IR scholarship	97
The polemical nature of debates about postmodernism	99
Conclusion	100
Questions	101
Further reading	102

## Introduction

This chapter offers an account of postmodernism. It begins by drawing a distinction between two broad approaches to the postmodern: one that outlines the contours of a new historical period (postmodernity), and another that places emphasis on finding new ways of understanding modern practices of knowledge and politics (postmodernism). The second part of the chapter examines how postmodern ideas entered international relations scholarship, and how the ensuing debates often had a strong polemical tone. Given the complexity of these debates and the limited space available here, my engagement in no way claims to be comprehensive. My objective is limited to identifying some of the key themes in postmodern thought so that interested readers can then explore the issues at stake if they wish to do so.

Before starting off it is useful to acknowledge that defining **postmodernism** is no easy task. Postmodern scholarship is characterised more by diversity than by a common set of beliefs. Add to this that the postmodern has become a very contentious label which is used less by its advocates and more by polemical critics who fear that embracing postmodern values would throw us into a dangerous nihilist void. But while the contours of the postmodern will always remain elusive and contested, the substantial issues that the respective debates have brought to the fore are important enough to warrant attention.

## Postmodernity as a new historical period

The postmodern has become a stretched, widely used and highly controversial term. It first achieved prominence in literary criticism and architecture, but eventually spread into virtually all realms, including international relations. What the postmodern actually means is highly disputed. The increasing sense of confusion in the proliferation of the postmodern led Gianni Vattimo (1992: 1) to note that this term is so omnipresent and faddish that it has become almost obligatory to distance oneself from it. But Vattimo, and many others, nevertheless held on. He, alongside such diverse authors as Jean-François Lyotard (1979), Jean Baudrillard (1983), David Harvey (1989), and Fredric Jameson (1984), viewed the postmodern as both a changing attitude and a fundamentally novel historical condition. They focused on cultural transformations that have taken place in the Western world and assumed, as Andreas Huyssen (1984: 8) summarises, that we are witnessing 'a noticeable shift in sensibility, practices and discourse formations which distinguishes a postmodern set of assumptions, experiences and propositions from that of a preceding period'. Such shifts are recognised in various globalising tendencies, such as the rapid evolution and global reach of mass media and other information and communication tools.

There are two broad ways of conceptualising inquiries into the postmodern. The first one revolves around attempts to demonstrate that we have entered a fundamentally new historical epoch. Some scholars believe that the all-encompassing historical period called modernity has given way to something else, a postmodernity (Vattimo 1988). To understand postmodern approaches one must thus first investigate the modern elements from which they try to distinguish themselves. No easy task, for modernity is a highly ambiguous concept, an elusive set of complexities that defy single meanings.

Modernity is generally understood to be the historical period that followed the Middle Ages. It emerged with the onset of the Renaissance in fifteenth-century Italy and

spanned the centuries that followed. The past 500 years have brought about changes that are more radical and far-reaching than virtually anything that had happened in previous human history. Countless dynamics started to unfold during the modern period. They are linked to such features as industrialisation, advances in science and technology and the spread of **weapons of mass destruction**. The **nation-state**, with all its disciplinary practices, emerged as the dominant political actor.

Postmodern approaches assume that changes over the past few decades have been significant enough to suggest that we have entered a period that is fundamentally different from the preceding modern one. The key features of this new postmodernity are associated with processes of **globalisation**, such as the rapid evolution and spread of mass media, computers and other communicative features. These processes, it is said, have led to a 'transparent society' (Vattimo 1992); to an 'ecstasy of communication' (Baudrillard 1985); to a post-industrial phase whose main feature is knowledge production (Lyotard 1984); or to the advance of new technologies and a consumer **democracy** which provides **capitalism** with an inherently new cultural logic (Jameson 1984). Paul Virilio believes that these developments have fundamentally altered the relationship between time and space. The centrality of the latter, he stresses, has decreased and time has taken over as the criterion around which many global dynamics revolve. The instantaneous character of communication and mass media has reduced the importance of duration and locality. The 'now' of the emission is privileged to the detriment of the 'here', the space where things take place (Virilio 1986; see also Harvey 1989).

Some commentators portray this new postmodern period in rather gloomy terms, stressing that our ability to influence political affairs is becoming increasingly elusive in a world that is too complex and interdependent to be shaped by the will of people. We hear of a nation-state that is no longer able to uphold its **sovereignty** and the spheres of justice and civility that the corresponding boundaries were supposed to protect. Disempowerment and disorientation have become key features of globalisation. We hear of a **neoliberal** world **order** that is increasingly run by a few powerful multilateral institutions and **multinational corporations**. Jean Baudrillard even believes that we have lost the ability to distinguish between reality and virtuality. Our media culture, he says, has conditioned our minds such that we have lost the ability to penetrate beneath the manifest levels of surface (Baudrillard 1983). Others view the postmodern period more optimistically. They point out that increased trade opportunities have brought prosperity to many parts of the world. Or they stress that new communicative tools open up a range of positive opportunities, from better cross-cultural communication to the possibilities of articulating cosmopolitan notions of democracy (see Connolly 2002: 178).

## Postmodernism as a critical way of understanding modernity

A second postmodern approach does not seek to identify the contours of a new historical epoch. Instead, it searches for means by which we can understand and live modernity in more reflective and inclusive ways. David Campbell (1998: 212–13) and Jean-François Lyotard (1991: 24–35) are examples of presumably postmodern authors who remind us that as modernity is already such an elusive phenomenon, the concept of postmodernity becomes nothing but a parody of the phantom it seeks to distance

itself from. Instead of looking at modernity as a historical period or a set of institutions, these authors follow Michel Foucault's (1984: 39) advice and treat it primarily as an attitude, 'a way of thinking and feeling', 'a mode of relating to contemporary reality'. Modernity, then, is the broad common theme that runs through a set of diverse practices which, superseding and intersecting with each other, have come to constitute our contemporary consciousness.

Here too, the key task is to distinguish a modern set of assumptions about the world from a superseding, postmodern way of conceptualising socio-political issues. One could say that the modern political consciousness issued to a considerable extent from the tension between Romanticism and the **Enlightenment**. What has been retained from the romantic ideal is the autonomy of the self, the quest for independence and **self-determination**, the belief that people can shape history. This form of modern **idealism** was then supplemented with the scientific heritage of the Enlightenment, with the desire to systematise, to search for rational foundations and certainty in a world of turmoil and constant flux.

The romantic element of our contemporary consciousness is epitomised in Hegel. What makes modernity different, in Hegel's view, is its attempt at self-understanding, the desire to establish **norms** and values on their own terms, rather than by way of borrowing from or rejecting the ideas of a surpassed epoch. The keystone of this process of self-grounding is the principle of subjectivity, which – at least in Habermas's reading of Hegel – is linked to a perception of freedom that recognises an individual's autonomy and responsibility in the realms of action and reflection (Habermas 1987: 16–44). The legacy of the Enlightenment then provides this subjectivity-oriented approach with stable and scientific foundations. Charles Baudelaire (1961: 1163), in a much-cited passage, draws attention to the recurring quest for certainty in a world of turbulence and chaos. While describing modernity as 'the transient, the fleeting, the contingent', Baudelaire points towards the constant attempts to discover underlying patterns behind these ephemeral features. He describes the recurring quest for essences as a desire to 'extract the eternal out of the transient'.

Within such modern attempts to fuse subjectivity and science there is ample room for discussion and diversity, more than in any preceding period. Indeed, Hegel considers the right to criticism precisely as one of modernity's key characteristics (Habermas 1987: 17). The breathing space necessary for criticism was provided by the emergence of a public sphere in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. Passionate debates were waged about all aspects of modern life. Virtually every opinion, every thought, every **theory** was attacked, refuted or at least submitted to intense and sustained scrutiny.

While the waging of fierce intellectual debates emerged as a key feature of modernity, the range of these debates was not as boundless as it appears at first sight. William Connolly (1993) emphasises that modern debates all have a distinctive character: they are all well framed. The contours of the modern framing process have to a large extent been drawn by the recurring unwillingness to deal with what Nietzsche (see Box 6.1) called the death of God: the disappearance, at the end of the medieval period, of a generally accepted worldview that provided a stable ground from which it was possible to assess nature, knowledge, common values, truth, politics – in short, life itself. When the old theocentric world crumbled, when the one and only commonly

accepted point of reference vanished, the death of God became the key dilemma around which modern debates were waged. Yet, instead of accepting the absence of stable foundations and dealing with the ensuing responsibilities, many prominent modern approaches embarked on attempts to find replacements for the fallen God. They desperately searched for stable foundations that could offer the type of order and certainty that was once provided by the Catholic Church. This is how Nietzsche famously put it:

God is dead; but given the way people are there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. – And we – we still have to vanquish his shadow, too. (Nietzsche, 1974: 167. Translation altered).

The quest to replace God and search for new ultimate foundations has taken different shapes in various stages of the modern project. For Renaissance humanists it centred around a sceptical and rhetorical belief in human agency and the virtue of ‘men’. During the Enlightenment it was trust in science and universal reason. For Romantics it was the belief in aesthetics and a deified self. For **Marxists** it consisted of faith in history’s teleological dimension.

### BOX 6.1: KEY FIGURES

#### **Friedrich Nietzsche: the ‘postmodern’ philosopher**

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) is often said to have influenced postmodern thought. He held many views on numerous topics, but his most influential legacy might relate to the manner in which he approached fundamental questions of knowledge. Nietzsche questioned the deeply entrenched modern search for universal forms of truth, whether they be based in Christian morals or on scientific foundations. He believed that the search for truth always contained a will to power. This is why critics accused him of nihilism: that is, of advocating a world in which we no longer have moral values. Postmodern proponents of Nietzsche strongly disagree with such a view. They believe Nietzsche can provide us with crucial insights into political dynamics: he makes us realise why we need to pay attention to processes of inclusion and exclusion, and to how knowledge and power are always intertwined.

The well-bounded nature of modern debates is perfectly epitomised in international relations scholarship. Here, too, everything has been debated fiercely. Seemingly nothing was spared criticism. And yet these debates have all been well framed. They have been framed by the urge to impose order upon a complex and elusive modern world. Steve Smith has drawn attention to this framing process. For him, **positivism** is the common theme that runs through a diverse set of mainstream approaches to international relations. At its most elementary level, positivism is based on an attempt to separate subject and object. It implies that the social scientist, as detached observer (subject), can produce value-free knowledge of an independent reality (object); that our comprehension of facts can be separated from our relationship with them (S. Smith 1996: 11–44; see also 2004: 499–515; see Chapter 1).

For a postmodern scholar the key task is thus to accept the death of God: to recognise that there are no underlying foundations that can absolve us of taking

**Figure 6.1** Friedrich Nietzsche, 1882, by Gustave Schultze



Source: Wikimedia commons.

responsibility for political decisions. Thinking and acting inevitably express a 'will to truth', a desire to control and impose order upon random and idiosyncratic events. 'To think', Adorno (1992: 17) says, 'is to identify'. When we think we identify choices, privilege one interpretation over others and, often without knowing it, exclude what does not fit into the way we want to see things. There is no escape from this process, no possibility of extracting pure facts from observation. To disrespect these limits to cognition is to endow one particular and necessarily subjective form of knowledge with the **power** to determine the nature of factual evidence. It is from such a theoretical vantage point that scholars like Jim George (1994) or Richard Ashley (1984) have tried to show how positivist approaches have transformed one specific interpretation of world political realities, the dominant realist one, into reality per se. As a result, realist perceptions of the international have gradually become accepted as 'common sense', to the point that any critique against them has to be evaluated in terms of an already existing and largely naturalised (realist) worldview. Smith detects powerful mechanisms of control precisely in this ability to determine meaning and rationality, to decide which issues are or are not legitimate concerns for international theorists. 'Defining common sense', he argues, 'is the ultimate act of political power' (Smith 1996: 13). It separates the possible from the impossible and directs the theory and practice of world politics on a particular path.

## BOX 6.2: DISCUSSION POINTS

### The politics of representation I: René Magritte's 'This is not a pipe'

We have seen in this chapter that postmodern authors believe that interpretation and representation are inevitable aspects of politics; that facts are not pre-given but depend on how we view and intellectualise them.

Nowhere do we find a more compelling illustration of this position than in a famous painting by the surrealist René Magritte (1898–1967). The painting features a carefully drawn pipe placed above an equally carefully hand-written line that reads '*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*' ('This is not a pipe'). On the one hand, this statement seems silly: of course this is a pipe. But at a closer look we realise that Magritte is right. This is not a pipe but only a drawing of a pipe, a representation. In everyday life we use such representations and others to make sense of the world around us. In this painting Magritte playfully highlights the complex relationship between representations and objects, words and things.

Michel Foucault wrote a little book on the subject called *This is not a pipe* ([1973] 1983).

## The emergence of the third debate in IR scholarship

Postmodern approaches entered IR scholarship during the mid to late 1980s in the context of what is usually called the 'third debate' (see Chapter 1). The first great debate is said to have taken place during the inter-war period, when **liberalism** and **realism** (see Chapters 2 and 3) disagreed fundamentally about how to oppose the spectre of Nazi Germany. The second great debate was followed by post-war **methodological** disputes between behaviouralism and traditionalism. Various versions of these debates have emerged since, and so have disputes about the adequacy of representing IR scholarship as a series of great debates (see Introduction).

The third debate was waged around so-called **epistemological** questions, that is, questions about how we can know the realities of world politics. An increasing number of scholars identified themselves as 'dissidents'. They expressed a growing dissatisfaction with prevailing realist, positivist, **state-centric** and masculine approaches to the study of international relations (Ashley and Walker 1990: 263). Common to these dissident approaches was a strong opposition to what Lyotard (1979: 7–9) famously described as a modern tendency to ground and legitimise knowledge in reference to a grand narrative, that is, a universalising framework which seeks to **emancipate** the individual by mastering the conditions of life. Postmodern approaches, by contrast, try to understand processes of exclusion and inclusion that are inevitably entailed in the articulation of knowledge and political positions. They seek to challenge and uproot entrenched thinking patterns, such that we can see the world from more than one perspective and marginalised voices can be brought into the realm of dialogue.

Important early contributions to postmodern international relations scholarship can be found in the work of such authors as Richard Ashley, David Campbell (1992; 1998), William Connolly, Costas Constantinou, Simon Dalby, James Der Derian, Jenny Edkins, Jim George (1994), Michael Shapiro, R. B. J. Walker and Cynthia Weber (see Ashley and Walker 1990; Constantinou, 1996b; Der Derian and Shapiro 1989; Edkins, 1999; R. B. J. Walker 1993; Cynthia Weber 1995).

### BOX 6.3: DISCUSSION POINTS

#### The politics of representation II: Remembering and forgetting

Here is a little political experiment you can do yourself to see why questions of representation are both inevitable and political:

Next time you sit in a restaurant, try to remember one minute of what you read, see, sense, smell, feel and rationalise during this short time span: everything, from all the items on the menu and their prices to the size, shape and colour of the objects you see, or the way they project shadows onto other objects. Remember all the details about all the people, how they look, the way they move, what they say, in all their different accents and languages. Remember all the smells and sounds, all your emotional and rational reactions to these impressions, and how you compared them, directly or subconsciously, to impressions from previous experiences.

Try to remember all the 'facts' during this one minute of your life. Of course, it is impossible to remember all of this. The only way to remember anything about these sixty seconds is to forget at least 99.99 per cent of what you have experienced.

If we cannot retrace a single minute of our mundane life, how could we possibly remember something as monumental as, say, World War I, the Cuban missile crisis, the collapse of the Berlin Wall or any other event in world politics? Again, the only way is to forget virtually everything about it, except for the few facts, impressions and interpretations that have been deemed memorable.

That is precisely what IR scholarship is doing: selecting what is to be remembered and separating it from the overwhelming rest. This is a process of representation and it is both selective, subjective and highly political.

Next time you read an account of a political event ask yourself: what kind of politics of representation is involved here? Which facts are remembered and which are forgotten? Why is this the case? What are the political consequences?

There are, meanwhile, several concise and highly convincing summaries of postmodern approaches to international relations. Three stand out. The first such study is by Richard Devetak (2009b). He identifies four common features: 1) a key concern with the relationship between power and knowledge; 2) the employment of post-positivist methodologies, such as **deconstruction** and **genealogy**; 3) a critical engagement with the role of the **state** and related questions of boundaries, violence and identity; and 4) the resulting need to fundamentally rethink the relationship between politics and ethics. A second study is an equally compelling chapter by David Campbell (2007: 203–28). He prefers the term poststructuralism over postmodernism. He speaks not of a paradigm or a theory, but of a critical attitude to understanding how certain forms of politics become possible and are seen as legitimate and rational. While conventional scholarly inquiries often take such factors as pre-given, poststructural approaches consider processes of interpretation and representation as both inevitable and as inherently political in nature. The respective scholars study the power relationships involved and help us understand how global politics is produced, conducted and understood. Finally, the most recent summary of postmodern approaches to international relations is authored by Anthony Burke (2008: 359–77). He too does an excellent job in crystallising the key issues at



stake, focusing on the need to expose how prevailing approaches have imposed one particular version of 'reality' upon a far more diverse, complex world. Burke reveals how postmodern attempts to break free of such constraints are not only sophisticated and complex, but also of direct practical relevance.

These summaries already make clear that postmodern approaches are highly diverse. They also employ a range of different methods to study political phenomena. Among the most prominent ones are, as Devetak has pointed out, genealogy and deconstruction. The former is associated with Nietzsche and the French philosopher Michel Foucault. The latter is linked to Jacques Derrida and poststructuralism. Both genealogy and deconstruction recognise that we cannot represent the world as it is. Our understanding of political and social phenomena is intrinsically linked to the cultural environment we are embedded in, the values we hold and the language we use to express them. The term 'discourse' is often used to express how this intertwining of political practices, cultural values and linguistic representations makes up the world as we know it.

The key objective for postmodern scholars is not to arrive at some objective truth about political events or phenomena. Such an endeavour would be as problematic as it is futile. The point, rather, is to increase understanding of how power and knowledge are intertwined in all representations of politics. Genealogy is an alternative form of history: an effort to illuminate how particular historical evolutions created the type of world we live in today. Deconstruction, by contrast, is a scholarly method designed to expose values and power relations that are entailed – either explicitly or implicitly – in particular texts, ranging anywhere from political speeches to legal documents and popular magazines. Both of these methods are an integral part of postmodern inquiries into the modern practices that make up our contemporary world.

## The polemical nature of debates about postmodernism

Postmodern contributions to international relations soon became highly controversial. They triggered a number of heated debates and often very polemical attacks. Defenders of the postmodern presented it as a necessary critique of modern thought-forms and their problematic impact on political practices. Opponents justified the modern project at all cost, for they feared that postmodern alternatives would induce an endless fall into a relativist abyss. Many established scholars believed that a postmodern celebration of difference would undermine the search for coherent visions of world politics. And such visions, the argument went, were badly needed at a time when violent conflicts and economic insecurities haunted the post-Cold War system. Some went as far as fearing that heeding postmodern approaches would open up the floodgates to relativistic ravings according to which 'anything goes' and 'any narrative is as valid as another' (Østerud 1996: 386).

The polemical nature of the debate about the potentials and problems of postmodernism is well epitomised by the contribution of Darryl Jarvis. He edited one of the few collections that explicitly engage postmodern approaches to international relations (Jarvis 2002). The volume contains summaries of postmodern approaches

followed by critical engagements with them. Jarvis himself is particularly sceptical of postmodernism. Taking on scholars such as Richard Ashley, James Der Derian and Cynthia Enloe, Jarvis (2000: xi) believes that postmodern approaches are 'taking the discipline down an ideologically destructive road'. He writes of postmodernism's 'radical rejectionism' and of 'a compendium of the visual arts, science fiction, identities, personal stories, and research whims whose intellectual agendas are so disparate as to be meaningless'. Without clear disciplinary boundaries, Jarvis believes, we 'lose sight of the subject we once used to study' and thus end up in a 'vacuous activity, facile and devoid of meaning' (Jarvis 2000: xi, 5, 7).

At stake is nothing less than the practical relevance of IR scholarship. Postmodernism is seen by its critics as a mere **meta-theory**: a scholarly endeavour that is concerned only with theory, thus lacking any meaning in the real world (Jarvis 2000: 21, 170, 197). This is not the point at which to engage and evaluate the debates between proponents and opponents of postmodernism. Nor is it the place to summarise, in detail, all postmodern contributions to international relations scholarship. Quite a few of them, including the present author, would refuse labelling practices altogether. Indeed, labelling and surveying, a postmodernist would say, is a typically modern attempt to bring order and certainty into a world of chaos and flux. It is a desire to squeeze freely floating and thus somewhat worrisome ideas into surveyable categories, to cut off and smooth the various overlapping edges so that each piece neatly fits into its assigned place. This is why the positive potential of postmodern approaches can be appreciated and realised in practice only once we move beyond the current polemic that surrounds the term postmodernism.

## Conclusion

By challenging the modern assumptions of dominant approaches to international relations, postmodernists have tried to open up various possibilities for rethinking not only the relationship between theory and evidence, fact and value, but also the very nature of the dilemmas that have haunted world politics for decades.

Summarising the nature of postmodern approaches is not easy, for if they have a unifying point it is precisely the acceptance of difference, the refusal to uphold one position as the correct and desirable one. 'The postmodern begins', Wolfgang Welsch (1988: 29–30) says, 'where totality ends'. Its vision is the vision of plurality, a positive attempt to secure and explore multiple dimensions of the processes that legitimise and ground social and political practices. Once the end of totalising thought is accepted, it becomes, of course, very difficult to talk about the postmodern without descending into clichés or doing grave injustice to individual authors who explore various terrains of difference. Jane Flax (1990: 188) recognised this difficulty and admits that by speaking about postmodernism one already runs 'the risk of violating some of its central values – heterogeneity, multiplicity, and difference'.

This diversity is evident when we look at the postmodern approaches to international relations. Related authors have embarked on a great variety of projects. They have exposed numerous problematic features, including the state-centrism of realist and liberal approaches to international relations, as well as their narrow perceptions of what the international is and where its relations take place. They have challenged the masculine and Eurocentric values of existing approaches or re-examined such notions

as **security**, identity, agency, sovereignty, diplomacy, **geopolitics** and ethics. And they have used a multitude of post-positivist methodologies to do so: genealogies and deconstruction, for instance.

Postmodern scholars express a deep scepticism towards totalising and universalising forms of knowledge. Although this form of scepticism is characterised more by the search for tolerance and diversity than by a common political agenda, one can still identify several broad postmodern features that are of direct practical relevance to both the theory and practice of world politics. Of particular political importance are the following three interrelated features.

First, postmodern approaches stress that order, security, **peace** and justice cannot be imposed by a preconceived universal model, be it of a **communist**, neoliberal or any other nature. There is no inherent model for peace, no grand plan that could free us of violence and deliver perpetual peace. Every political model, no matter how sensitive, is based on a system of exclusion. Such exclusion is as desirable as it is necessary. But in order to stay valid and fair, political foundations need to be submitted to periodic scrutiny. Extending William Connolly's approach, the search for peace should thus be linked to a certain attitude, an 'ethos', which is based not on a set of fundamental principles but on the very need to periodically disturb such principles (Connolly 1995).

Second, the search for peace, security and justice must pay key attention to questions of inclusion and exclusion, which lie at the heart of violence. No order can be just and promote peace unless it is sensitive to the power relations it upholds. Maintaining sensitivity to this process entails, as with the first factor outlined above, an ongoing self-critical engagement with the type of political project that is being advanced in the name of peace. Expressed in other words, the task is to expose the power-knowledge nexus entailed in all political projects, thereby opening up opportunities for marginalised voices to be heard and brought into the realm of dialogue.

Third, peace, security and justice can only be established and maintained through an empathetic engagement with and respect for difference, be it related to sexual, cultural, racial, ethnic, religious, political or any other form of identity. The challenge then consists of not letting difference deteriorate into violence, but making it part of a worldview that is tolerant of multiple political and moral sources.

## QUESTIONS

1. Postmodern approaches to knowledge are said to be different from modern ones. How exactly are they different? What are the key components of each tradition of thought? And what are the concrete political consequences of these different ways of knowing world politics?
2. Postmodern approaches are said to display an inherent scepticism towards so-called grand narratives: forms of knowledge that proclaim 'true' insight into the world and then universalise the ensuing political positions. What are the reasons for this scepticism? Is it justified?
3. Postmodern approaches are often associated with pessimism and relativism, with positions that can no longer separate right from wrong, good from evil. Do you believe that this accusation is warranted? Defend your conclusion by juxtaposing arguments advanced by proponents and opponents of postmodernism.