THE NEW RELATIVISM

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The New Relativism

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Relativism has a history. Although it is virtually coterminous with western thought, an
uninterrupted feature of our intellectual tradition, philosophers have had no trouble dating its
permutations: cognitive relativism, moral relativism, first-order relativism, etc. ad infinitum.

This paper advances a different history of relativism. Rather than parsing it by its
philosophical or epistemic properties, I argue that the shifting meaning of relativism can be seen
in the changing roster of virtues and vices that have, at different points in history, made
relativism relevant. To demonstrate the point, I consider two recent and influential versions of
relativism: postmodernism and the post-truth age (the latter being the occasion of our gathering).
Although these are unwieldy terms, they share a few decisive properties: they both designate
massively influential cultural movements and shifting intellectual priorities. Most importantly,
relativism is so central to both enterprises that it could not be extracted from either without
changing the basic nature of the movement.

From the perspective of postmodernism and the post-truth age, however, the common
ingrediency of relativism is misleading. The two relativisms are in fact very different. Under the
flag of postmodernism, relativism was important because of its entanglement with compelling
notions of humility, justice, and democracy. In this paradigm, a bedrock concern for the
irreducible voice of the other pushed relativism to the forefront of the humanities. The liberal arts
played an essential role. They were both an engine of relativism (insisting on the particularity of every perspective) even as they tempered its potentially destructive effects (by keeping it yoked to questions of justice and democracy).

Under the flag of the post-truth age, however, a very different relativism emerges. Once driven by a basic humility about the capacity of theory to capture the diversity of the world, relativism is now the side effect of a basic arrogance: dissenting voices are always and only prejudiced. In a world exhausted by prejudice, the democratic processes of argument and discussion are untenable, the highest political need is a powerful person with whom one agrees, and authoritarianism is the only logical political system. The relativism of the post-truth age is thus vastly different: it is motivated by arrogance rather than humility, prejudice rather than justice, and authoritarianism rather than democracy.

Following the elaboration of these two relativisms, I conclude with a short reflection on the role of the liberal arts—and sciences—in a post-truth age.

**Relativism #1: Postmodernism and an Apartment Complex**

Postmodernism was born at 3:32pm on July 15, 1972. This, at least, was the claim of Charles Jencks, who famously dated the advent of postmodernity to the moment the final building in the Pruitt-Igoe housing complex in St. Louis was demolished.¹ Although the precision of Jenck’s claim may be overstated, and although his chronology may be questioned, his birth narrative for postmodernism nonetheless captures a dominant strand of postmodern thought and beautifully illuminates the meaning of relativism therein.

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Pruitt-Igoe was created in 1954 and gave material form to the modern dream of social engineering. Armed with avant-garde advances in architecture and urban planning, the 2,870 one-size-fits-all apartments of Pruitt-Igoe were designed to eliminate crime-ridden slums, free the city’s poorest people from tenements and common toilets, and push back the poverty that was encroaching on the city’s central business district. The scheme was a textbook example of what James Scott calls “authoritarian high modernism”: an unchecked faith in the power of human reason, rational engineering, and scientific progress to eliminate misery.²

It did not work. Crime was rampant, in part because the police refused to patrol. Disease and contamination flourished, in part because trash was not collected and buildings were not repaired. When the elevators broke, the shafts became receptacles for the ever-increasing mountain of rubbish. After a mere 17 years, the conditions were so bad that well-placed dynamite seemed like the only solution. And thus, on July 15, 1972, the city’s $36 million investment came crashing down. As if this was not dramatic enough, Jencks (and later David Harvey) suggested that modernity itself came down with the blighted apartments.³

If the fall of Pruitt-Igoe marked the death of modernity, it was because it exposed high modernism (the dream of outthinking misery) as a form of epistemic arrogance: how could the champions of modern architecture or the sages of urban planning possibly understand the experience of the urban poor? The failure of Pruitt-Igoe thus marked the limits of abstract reason. The world was simply too diverse to be mastered by the most rigorous urban planning or the most avant-garde social theory; in the wake of Pruitt-Igoe, there could never again be a one-size fits all solution to human suffering. Henceforth, Jencks proclaimed, buildings must be designed

relative to the people who lived in them rather than according to high-minded principles fabricated at a distance. Thus, at the moment of its founding, postmodernism—and by extension relativism—was driven by a strong sense of epistemic humility, if not humiliation.

For Jencks and Harvey, the epistemic humility demanded by the failure of Pruitt-Igoe was strongly connected to questions of social justice. The fate of the St. Louis apartments demonstrated that the dream of high-modernism was not only arrogant, it was also unjust: “The working poor were often the first subjects of scientific social planning.” If Harvey, Jencks, Scott, and an entire generation of intellectuals embraced relativism, it was because their experience of modernity taught them to read epistemic arrogance as a taproot of injustice. No one saw this quite as clearly as Lewis Mumford, the great humanist critic of urban planning and modern social theory. Writing in 1949—at the apex of high-modernism—Mumford described the work of Le Corbusier (whose student Minoru Yamasaki designed Pruitt-Igoe) as a form of “covert imperialism.” For Mumford, social engineering, European colonialism, and cultural imperialism were three forms of injustice springing from a common problem. The mainspring of injustice was the sheer arrogance of a modernity that misinterpreted the elite, Western experience as universal and, for this reason, imposed cultural, intellectual, and material products (apartments, versions of Christianity, and capitalism) the world over. On this reading, Pruitt-Igoe was a case study in the arrogance of the modern imagination, its blindness to the diversity of the world, and the unchecked misery in its wake.

While the veracity of this interpretation of modernity may be (and has been) questioned, its effects are easy to document: relativism has never been the basenote, or driving force, of postmodernism. Rather, at the moment of its inception, postmodernism deployed relativism to

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5 Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 92.
counter the epistemic arrogance of modernity and, by a newfound humility, ensure justice for the widest possible range of people. If Jencks and Harvey became early standard bearers for American postmodernism, it is because they wanted to ensure that buildings (and social theory) were designed relative to the needs, desires, and aesthetic sensibilities of their users. Relativism became an antonym of imperialism and a counter-principle to the epistemic arrogance of high modernism. That is to say, the relativism of postmodernism sprung not from moral laxity, but from a heightened moral sensitivity; from a self-reflexive humility regarding the capacities of elite knowledge production; and from a strong, well-nurtured sense of justice.

If the historical emergence of postmodernism in America effectively linked relativism with the old virtues of humility and justice (and that is my argument), it should not be surprising that this form of relativism found natural expression in democratic politics. As Patrick Deneen has argued, democracy is built “on epistemic modesty and an embrace of imperfection and human fallibility.” In other words, precisely the same sensibility that drove the birth of postmodernism turned democracy into the “sole form of legitimate governance remaining in the world today.”

The postmodern alliance of justice, humility, democracy, and relativism is not simply compatible with a liberal arts education, for many it has also come to define the meaning of a liberal arts education. In American colleges and universities, the liberal arts are, to this day, overwhelmingly populated by a demographic that can be defined by the twin pursuits of social justice and intellectual relativism. At least within the liberal arts communities that I have been exposed to, the embrace of relativism rarely (if ever) leads to an anything-goes, individualistic

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6 Much of Richard Rorty’s later work can be read as an extended argument for the linkages that bind relativism and democracy. See especially Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (Cambridge, 1989) and Achieving Our Country (Harvard 1998).
7 Patrick Deneen, Democratic Faith (Princeton, 2005), xiv.
politics. Even if, logically speaking, nihilism is the rational endpoint of relativism, in practice postmodern relativism has motivated a strong sense of justice and, as Deneen noted, a robust commitment to democracy. At my institution, the strongest adherents of relativism are the most committed democratic activists. From Pruitt-Igoe forward, the commitment to relativism has been allied to the pursuit of justice; sometimes I think the humanities are the preachiest corner of the university. One thing is sure, postmodernism gave the liberal arts a positive moral valence; in binding together relativism, humility, and justice, postmodernism allowed the liberal arts to turn cultural and intellectual relativism into an education for democracy.

Relativism #2: The Post-Truth Age and a Hillbilly Neighbor

Relativism is no longer motivated by humility or justice. Under the flag of a post-truth age, relativism is a product of a pervasive suspicion that the voice of the other is little more than “the politicized engine of propaganda.” Where relativism was once a check against particular cultural forms (like modern architecture) masquerading as universal—or even “normal”—it is now a product of the conviction that the biases of the speaker determine the content of the claim. For postmodernism, the particularity of modern architecture (or, more broadly, western social theory) in the context of a diverse world was the ultimate justification of relativism. In a post-truth age, however, the principle of particularity has, as it were, passed over to the other side. It is no longer the fact of cultural difference that demands relativism, but our sense that every speaker has been bought, that every claim is little more than a reflection of a priori commitments, and that all truth claims have become talking points: stockpiles of anecdotes,

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8 “Knowledge in Crisis: Liberal Learning in a Post-Truth Age.”
arguments, histories, and facts the decisive benefit of which is their fidelity to the politics of the speaker. In short, the prejudice of the speaker has replaced the diversity of the world as the engine of relativism. When prejudice becomes the universal referent of public discourse, when every statement signals nothing more than the politics of the speaker, then relativism of a severe stripe is the only option.

It is essential to stress that, in a post-truth world, prejudice has become a capacious category. David Hume may have known in 1757 that prejudice was “destructive of sound judgment,” but he did not know that it would, in time, become destructive of all judgement. To his mind, prejudice was dangerous because it implied judging the common world through the prism of personal interest. In a post-truth age, however, there is no “common world.” Everything that was once thought to bear on a common world—science no less than literature—has been subsumed into the newly capacious category of prejudice. Every political commitment now comes with its own stock of facts, its own scientists on retainer, its own address on K Street, and its own authorized version of history. When disputants on either side of question marshal their own competing facts, scientists, and histories, it is a sure sign that the world itself is no longer common. What was once considered as objective, worldly evidence is now considered a form of prejudice.

The post-truth age does not mark, as the Oxford English Dictionary would have it, the triumph of the emotional appeals over the hard facts of the world. If the post-truth world signaled only the dangerous ascendancy of emotional appeals, there would be nothing new about our present moment, we would not be here for this conversation, and Aristotle might compete for

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the mantel of the post-truth philosopher *par excellence*. *Pace* the O.E.D., the post-truth age has nothing to do with the primacy of emotional appeals. Rather, the decisive characteristic of the post-truth age is that the once-hard facts of the world have assumed the subjective status classically reserved for emotions. Sciences and histories are no more reliable than rage or pity: all are in the domain of prejudice.

There is perhaps no more telling anecdote of the new relativism than the experience of Bruno Latour trying in vain to convince his neighbor that 9/11 was not staged by the Central Intelligence Agency. A renowned philosopher, Latour has, by his own account, invested considerable energy arguing that scientific facts are relative. His method is quite simple: like any postmodern philosopher worth his or her salt, he shows that scientific facts, like everything else that populates our common world, were created in specific laboratories, by specific people, in specific contexts. By emphasizing the objective history of facts, he makes the common-sense point that their truth value is *relative* to the conditions of their emergence.

Latour was thus taken aback when his neighbor, an “unsophisticated hillbilly,” looked down on him because he naively believed in the reality of 9/11. “Remember the good old days,” Latour pined, “when university professors could look down on unsophisticated folks because those hillbillies naively believed in church, motherhood, and apple pie?” The situation had been reversed, and now Latour was the gullible one. His hillbilly neighbor was not unaware of the evidence in favor of 9/11, he simply interpreted it as the personal prejudice of a leftist academic. Latour perfectly captures the shift in relativism (and the decisive role of prejudice therein) with his summary of the situation: “While we [sociologists of science] spent years trying to detect the

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real prejudices hidden behind the appearance of objective statements, do we now have to reveal the real objective and incontrovertible facts hidden behind the illusion of prejudices?"

As Latour’s neighbor demonstrates, the relativism of a post truth age is of a far more radical stripe than that advanced under the banner of postmodernism. Relativism is now driven not by the diversity of a common world but by the dissolution of the world into prejudice. The time-tested method of pushing back the frontiers of relativism through appeals to a common world is no longer available. Just as Robert Boyle and the Royal Society once gathered in London to establish facts through the common witnessing of public experiments, the leading postmodern thinkers derived their commitment to relativism from objective status of the diverse world. In this regard, the work of Michel Foucault is exemplary. Describing his work as “positivist” and “empirical,” Foucault treated the common world as a source of evidence that could, under certain conditions, bestow upon his particular opinions the dignity of a common cause. Indeed, if the diversity of the world (and his own place in it) drove Foucault to relativism, the objectivity of the diverse world underpinned his moral projects. Foucault was a true postmodern: for him relativism and social justice were two sides of the same coin. The diversity of the world demanded relativism: the objectivity of the diverse world underpinned his moral crusade.

Twenty-nine years after Foucault wrote *Discipline & Punish*, Bruno Latour found himself in a very different position. Just as Foucault fought for prison reform and sexual freedom, Latour

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wanted to fight for environmental justice. But his neighbor would have none of it. Any evidence Latour could muster regarding greenhouse gasses or man-made pollutants was immediately dismissed as prejudice. While relativism once underpinned and made possible the pursuit of justice, it now undermines all such attempts.

Once driven by a basic humility about the capacity of social theory (or apartments) to capture the diversity of the world, relativism is now the side effect of a basic arrogance: dissenting voices are always and only prejudiced. While the older relativism tended towards democracy, the new relativism tends toward authoritarianism. In a world exhausted by prejudice, the democratic processes of argument and consensus are untenable and the highest political need is a powerful person with whom one agrees. Indeed, in a post-truth age, the question “who do you agree with?” becomes paramount. If I cannot marshal any evidence that will not register as prejudice, I can at least ask who agrees with me. This is all that remains of politics in a post-truth age, a basic sorting operation by which people, facts, critiques, and histories are sorted into one of two camps: agreed or disagreed.

The Liberal Arts (and Sciences) in a Post-Truth World

In the context of post-truth age, the highest goal of the liberal arts is the creation of a common world. In an epoch in which prejudice is beating the world in a zero-sum game (the latter retreating at the pace the former advances), there can be no more urgent task the recreation of a common world.

The liberal arts, however, are not up to the task. At least not alone. This for the simple reason that the post-truth regime has ignored academic boundaries. Science and history are equal losers in the reign of a post-truth world. If the events in Charlottesville in August 2017
demonstrate the transformation of history into prejudice (in multiple senses of the term), then the climate change “debate” demonstrates the parallel decline of science into prejudice. The post-truth age signals an indiscriminate erosion of the common world. The objectivity of fluorocarbons and the possibility of a shared history of the Civil War must both be counted as causalities of the post-truth age.

I conclude with a suggestion: if the post-truth age ignores the traditional intellectual distinction between the liberal arts and the sciences, perhaps we too, in response, should learn to ignore the old distinctions. Is it not possible that the very referential specificity of the liberal arts (it is not science; not STEM) actually aides and abets the dissolution of the common world? Could the products of the liberal arts (histories, critiques, etc.) or the products of the sciences (fluorocarbons, lactic acid, etc.) really be common if they are born in a strictly segmented university?

Perhaps we need to think of the liberal arts as Boyle thought of science and of the sciences as Foucault thought of history: both are fundamentally creative enterprises the success of which is measured by the extent to which the new products achieve common relevance. History and critique, in other words, are to be measured on the same scale as fluorocarbons and lactic acid: once they have been added to the world, can they achieve the reality that comes from common assent and shared acknowledgment? The post-truth age makes the task harder and the bar higher, but it does not make the task impossible.