

Four Different Ways to Be Absolutely Right

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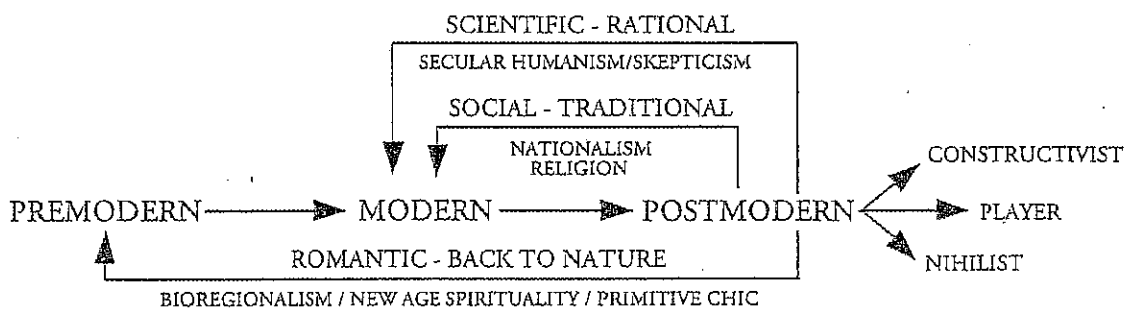
This is my own mapping of postmodern society, pointing out a kind of diversity that is often overlooked when people talk about pluralism.

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.

