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June 28, 2002

Fish Story

June 28, 2002 at 8:00 am

This essay originally appeared online at TNR Online.

In the wake of the September 11 attacks, commentators on intellectual life from a variety of quarters, including *The New York Times, Time* magazine, and *U.S. News and World Report*, speculated that the war into which the United States had been thrust would force a new seriousness upon the nation. And they wondered whether one consequence would be a decline for postmodernist thinking–among both the scholars who propound it and the students who imbibe it. As the argument went, postmodernism–with its celebration of irony, its commitment to the subversive, its conviction that all morality is local, historical, and socially constructed–would soon find itself out of step with the temper of the times.

Stanley Fish thinks otherwise. In an October op-ed for *The New York Times*–and, just this month, in a cover story for *Harper's*–Fish has mounted a public relations campaign on postmodernism's behalf. Far from becoming obsolete, Fish says, postmodernism is more timely than ever.

Fish brings noteworthy credentials to his self-appointed task. He is the guiding hand behind the Duke University English Department's rise to fame in the 1980s as the American home of French-influenced, cutting-edge literary theory; the director of Duke University Press when its trendy journal *Social Text* published Alan Sokal's parody of postmodernism, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermenuetics of Quantum Gravity," as if it represented competent analysis; the author of several smart but ultimately incoherent books published in the 1990s that mercilessly mocked the pretensions of academic liberals to neutrally reason their way to their favorite public policy preferences and conclusions about constitutional law; and he is now the fabulously paid dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago, aggressively seeking to build the institution by luring celebrity academics to its faculty with the promise of sky high salaries.

But if Fish is a formidable figure, he is also a slippery one. He has developed a reputation as a mischievous bad boy of the academy, iconoclastically exposing campus claptrap and scholarly conformity. At the same time, he has ascended deftly within the system,

ostentatiously enjoying the pleasures and perks that come with the exercise of power. His current argument about the relevance of postmodernism to September 11 and the world it created has this same, characteristically charming audacity about it. It is also rank sophistry.

Either Fish is confused about exactly what postmodernism means, or he is willing to say anything–no matter how internally inconsistent–to win an argument.

Or maybe both.

Consider the *Times* op-ed. As it did during the Sokal affair, the *Times* gave Fish a generous portion of its page to fend off skepticism about postmodernism's pertinence and staying power. Adopting the pose of a timid and cloistered scholar, Fish began by professing astonishment that anyone would take the time to even wonder about a connection between an "event so serious" as the September 11 attacks and "a rarefied form of academic talk." But within a few lines, the apparently baffled and politically innocent dean had transformed himself into a master analyst of the country's ills, concluding that more postmodernism, not less, was precisely what the nation needed.

That is, more of postmodernism correctly understood. According to Fish, the new critics didn't grasp postmodernism's true meaning. They were under the mistaken impression that "since postmodernists deny the possibility of describing matters of fact objectively, they leave us with no firm basis for either condemning the terrorist attacks or fighting back." In fact, claimed Fish, "Postmodernism maintains only that there can be no independent standard for determining which of many rival interpretations of an event is the true one."

These two passages may have left some readers puzzled. Had not Fish, in the span of two sentences, just reaffirmed the notion he said he was knocking down? The lack of independent standards for determining the truth among competing accounts is what most people mean by the impossibility of describing the facts objectively.

But the apparent contradiction didn't give Fish the slightest pause. Instead, he quickly moved on, offering a quite different account of what lies at the core of postmodernism: "The only thing postmodern thought argues against is the hope of justifying our response to the attacks in universal terms that would be persuasive to everyone, including our enemies." Apparently, postmodernism's central teaching was now perfectly consistent with the idea of universal standards. The only price was banality, since postmodernism (as Fish was now presenting it) stood for the sensible though innocuous proposition that not everybody will always grasp what universal standards require.

Now, if this is what postmodernism teaches, it is hard to understand what all the fuss has been about, on the part of the critics and on the part of the postmodernists who have always seen themselves as bold, revolutionary, and indispensable thinkers. But, of course, Fish's

platitude–not everybody in the world can be made to see things our way, and we should try our best to see things other people's way–is not in anybody's eyes what postmodernism is famous for.

Rather, the guiding theme of postmodernism is that objectivity, especially in morals, is a sham–in other words, precisely the definition Fish was disavowing in the *Times*. Postmodernists take their lead from Nietzsche's famous aphorism in *Beyond Good and Evil,* "There are no moral phenomena at all, but only a moral interpretation of phenomena." They draw inspiration and sustenance from the many books of the French theorist Michel Foucault, who held that the quest for truth in the study of history is wrongheaded–that, instead, one should seek to grasp "how effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false." And they (the postmodernists) consider as one of their outstanding contemporaries Judith Butler, a professor at the University of California at Berkeley, who asserts that "power pervades the very conceptual apparatus that seeks to negotiate its terms, including the subject position of the critic"; that "there is no ontologically intact reflexivity to the subject which is then placed within a cultural context"; and that "*agency is always and only a political prerogative*" [italics in original].

If these representative statements about postmodernism mean anything, it is that morality is created by human beings with no ground or sanction in reason or nature or heaven.

So, does such a way of thinking help or hinder the understanding of the September 11 attacks and our response? In the *Times* article, Fish suggested that postmodernism helps. Thanks to postmodernism, Fish contended, we can see why Susan Sontag was correct when, days after the attacks, she reprimanded those who spoke of the hijackers as "cowardly." Sontag, according to Fish, was right to stress that courage, which she insists the hijackers displayed, "is a 'morally neutral' term, a quality someone can display in the performance of a bad act."

But in ordinary language, courage is not at all morally neutral. We think it is not courage but cowardice to attack from the back–"stand up and fight like a man"–or to shoot an innocent person in cold blood even though the murderer risks the death penalty. And as it happens, ordinary usage is in agreement with Aristotle, who observed that courage involves not merely risking your life, but doing so for the sake of what is noble. Reducing courage to a "morally neutral" term reflects the relativism, the very incapacity to see simple moral distinctions, of which the critics of postmodernism have warned.

In *Harper's,* Fish has again trotted out his core obfuscation. Postmodernism doesn't mean that universal and objective standards don't exist, he insists. It only means that you "couldn't necessarily prove" the validity of the universal and objective standard to all others, for example to Osama bin Laden. Again, this seems true but trivial: Knowledge is one thing, persuasion another. However, Fish takes it in some non-trivial directions–specifically, in an attack on critics like Andrew Sullivan.

Back in October, Sullivan, writing in *The New York Times Magazine,* condemned the Al Qaeda terrorists for perverting Islam. First, Fish criticizes Sullivan's approach for supposing that it is *possible* to distinguish true religious faith from false: "the specification of what a religion is and the identification of the actions that may or may not be taken in its name are entirely *internal* matters" [italics in original]. But then Fish criticizes the Sullivan perspective for *failing* to accurately distinguish true religious faith from false: "This refusal of Al Qaeda-style Islam to honor the public/private distinction is the essence of that faith, and not some incidental feature of it that can be dispensed with or moderated."

Furthermore, Fish commits the very intellectual errors of which he accuses others. He condemns the "ignorance" of those who raised doubts about postmodernism after September 11 and derides the "preference" he finds in their thinking "for the vacuously general over the disturbingly particular." Yet to show the impossibility of criticizing Al Qaeda from the outside and the validity of the terrorists' interpretation from within Islam, he can do no better than offer warmed-over generalizations about the difference between liberal and Muslim conceptions of the public/private distinction. In the entire essay, Fish does not provide a shred of evidence from within Islamic sources and Islamic law to contradict the contention voiced by many serious students of Islam that the Al Qaeda terrorists distort and betray Islam's central teachings.

Indeed, despite his pontificating about the need to engage the "disturbingly particular," Fish often does his best to conceal the particular when it disturbs his own position. This can be seen in his dismissal of two more critics–Stanley Kurtz, for an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education,* and David Glenn, for an article in *The Nation*. Kurtz and Glenn contended that the campus speech codes developed in the 1990s to combat hate speech are now coming back to haunt their proponents, whose speech against the war has come under fire on campus and in some instances has been curtailed. Fish thinks that Kurtz and Glenn have made a conceptual error. Hate speech–"speech hurtful to women, blacks, Hispanics, and gays"–is one thing, argues Fish. But political speech, such as criticism of the U.S. war effort, or the expression of sympathy for Al Qaeda, is quite another, he argues, noting that political speech lies at the heart of what is protected by the First Amendment.

He's right on that last point. But Fish's flight into formal distinctions obscures the underlying reality. Campus speech codes encourage students, faculty, and administrators to recharacterize political opinions with which they disagree as statements that are hurtful and oppressive and which therefore must be forbidden. This produces habits of mind and intellectual norms that, when the winds shift, are easily extended to other topics and issues, posing a looming menace to the free inquiry to which our universities should be unflinchingly committed.

To be sure, the case of postmodernism does not stand or fall on Fish's two articles. Ultimately, his penchant for mischaracterization, indifference to the facts, and self-contradiction, doesn't refute the postmodern challenge. It just refutes Stanley Fish.