

A Balm for the Pathologies of Postmodernism

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Observation

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To assert that ours is the postmodern age, as do many left-wing intellectuals and not a few conservatives, is to sow confusion about the character of the era in which we live.

Postmodernism is associated with a variety of grandiose projects, pursued most intensively within colleges and universities but spreading their influence outward into the media and affecting the attitudes, the language, and the conduct of social, political, educational, and religious institutions of all kinds. Underlying these extravagant enterprises—they include the deconstruction of texts, the repudiation of the Western canon if not the overcoming of Western civilization itself, the embrace of multiculturalism, and the celebration of self-creation—are extraordinary claims. By undermining comprehensive historical narratives,

debunking authoritative judgments about morality, politics, and truth, and discrediting transcendent principles of philosophy and religion, postmodernism believes itself to have effected a radical break with modernity and ushered in a new epoch.

Yet, contrary to its defining boasts, postmodernism explicitly offers a comprehensive and putatively unchallengeable historical narrative of its own, issues canonical moral judgments, and affirms inviolable principles. Reminiscent of the progressive understanding of history associated with Kant, Hegel, and Marx, postmodern theorists maintain—albeit in a hyper-convoluted jargon that opens new vistas in rigidity, pomposity, and obscurantism—that their discoveries, by dissolving false and oppressive hierarchies, set people free and promote human equality.

This claim itself, however, exposes the degree to which postmodernism does *not* mark a new era in politics and ideas. And that is because freedom and equality are the principles of modernity itself. Or, more cautiously, they are the principles of liberal-democratic modernity, which develops around the premise that human beings are by nature free and equal and seeks to construct a political order that protects individual freedom equally under law. Contrary to its endless claims to have brought something entirely new into the world, postmodernism is thus but a late—and particularly pathological—development in the history of liberal modernity.

In *Past and Present: The Challenges of Modernity, from the Pre-Victorians to the Postmodernists*, Gertrude Himmelfarb expertly unfolds and exposes the roots of postmodernism in the challenges presented by the modern liberal-democratic order: the same order that postmodernism affects to repudiate. Written with old-fashioned grace and elegance, and an up-to-date engagement with contemporary politics and public policy, the twenty essays collected here span nearly 65 years of scholarship and intellectual vivacity.

A professor emeritus at the Graduate School of the City of New York and a distinguished intellectual and cultural historian of the modern era, with special attention to Victorian and post-Victorian Britain, Himmelfarb is the author of numerous works that demonstrate the power of scholarship to illuminate the public interest by bringing the lessons of the past—including, in key instances, the Jewish past—to bear on the problems of the present. In contrast to our progressive professoriate, which, she writes, imposes its values “upon a benighted, retrograde past,” she admits to an opposite “temptation”—that of “imposing the values and perhaps virtues of the past upon the present.”

In Himmelfarb’s case, this is a decidedly advantageous perspective: one that, with her help, enables us to see today’s challenges, not least the pathologies of postmodernism, as they really are.

The essays in *Past and Present* examine a number of leading figures in government and the realm of ideas and address a variety of moral and political issues in modern Britain and the United States. Himmelfarb does not seek to impose an artificial unity on her chapters or claim that they form a single argument. At the same time, the extended dialogue she constructs between past and present revolves around three great themes: the need to restore the search for truth as the guiding principle of historical and philosophical inquiry; the dependence of economic and political freedom on moral character; and the importance of moderation in counteracting liberal democracy's inherent weaknesses. Himmelfarb's reflections on these great themes provide essential lessons in the defense of liberal democracy.

Himmelfarb's first great theme—the primacy of truth in moral and political inquiry—forms the subject of “Political Thinking: Ancients vs. Moderns,” an essay originally published in *Commentary* in 1951. It features a discussion of the political philosopher Leo Strauss (1899–1973), whom she commends, first, for having pitted the wisdom of classical political philosophy against the modern prejudice—a prejudice that has led to mountains of arid and useless research—that only a rigorous application of the methods of the natural sciences to man and society will reveal the truth about morality and politics.

In reviving classical political philosophy, Himmelfarb writes, Strauss also exposed the poverty of another modern conceit that took root in the 19th century and goes under the names of historicism and relativism: namely, that great minds are at best great for their own time but bereft of an understanding that is good for all times. As against the kindred fallacies of scientism and historicism, Strauss redirected attention, Himmelfarb writes, to “the perennial questions of philosophy: the nature of man and his happiness, of pleasure and virtue, morality and nature, justice and power, private and public morality, the natural and the best state, piety and law, the ruler and the ruled.”

To clarify “the enduring truths of humanity,” Strauss turned to the interpretation of texts. For her part, Himmelfarb turned to the interpretation of history. In particular, her essays here explore exceptional men and women navigating the “tensions besetting modernity” both in the realm of politics and in the realm of ideas. These include the tension between religion and science, freedom and order, individual rights and democracy, high culture and ordinary life, and more. At every step she takes issue with, in her bracing words, “the terrible simplifiers on both sides” who “tend to dominate the discourse.”

It would be a mistake, though, to think that Himmelfarb's determination to give each side its due stems from an aversion to conflict or a refusal to take a stand. It is, rather, a rigorous expression of her love of truth. Observation, experience, and historical study—especially that of classical liberalism—taught her that truth rarely resides unalloyed in any one overarching principle, school of thought, political orientation, or policy prescription. For her, approaching the truth is a matter of discovering traces, fragments, and occasionally substantial deposits in

diverse sources. These must then be distilled, combined, and harmonized. It is a daunting task and a moral enterprise, undertaken “[i]n the face of the certainty that the effort of objectivity will fall short of what it aims at.”

Those are the words of one of Himmelfarb’s mentors, the eminent literary critic Lionel Trilling (1905-1975). She takes them, along with the remainder of Trilling’s observation, as a kind of mission statement:

[T]hose who undertake to make the effort [of objectivity] do so out of something like a sense of intellectual honor and out of the faith that in the practical life, which includes the moral life, some good must follow from even the relative success of the endeavor.

It would be hard to think of a formula more bracingly antithetical to the postmodernist enterprise, which has no more use for the concept of objectivity than it does for the concept of intellectual honor.

The case for intellectual virtue is bound up with Himmelfarb’s second great theme, which is the indispensableness of moral character. In a 2014 essay for the *Weekly Standard*, Himmelfarb examined the reasons given by Edmund Burke, the 18th-century British statesman and founder of modern conservatism, for decrying “the false, reptile prudence, the result not of caution but of fear,” that counseled making peace with revolutionary France, a regime that in the name of liberty, equality, and fraternity had killed a king and launched a “Reign of Terror.”

Here Himmelfarb sees a disturbing analogy to Americans who believe that Islamic extremists can be dealt with through negotiation and diplomacy. Like revolutionary France, she observes, Islamism is characterized by “an armed doctrine,’ a ‘system,’ a ‘faction of opinion,’ which knows no compromise and cannot be managed.” The error made by those who seek accommodation with the Islamists, Himmelfarb contends, like the error made in Burke’s day by those who sought to compromise with French revolutionaries, springs as much from faulty character as it does from incoherent thinking.

If Burke is one touchstone for Himmelfarb, Matthew Arnold is another. In a 1994 *New Republic* essay on a new edition of Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (first published in 1869), she examines the connection between corruption of culture and the deterioration of character.

Arnold, she writes, espoused “a common, progressive, universal culture” grounded in reason, in a free and inquiring mind, and in study of “the best which has been thought and said in the world.” This culture, he hoped, “would elevate and unify all classes,” and he contrasted it to the anarchy of the then-increasingly popular interpretation of freedom as doing as one pleases—which, far from leading to complete disorder, fostered a mechanical devotion to wealth, material goods, and the body.

Himmelfarb discerns a line from Arnold's "anarchy"—which to him meant the gradual letting-go of the mental cultivation achieved through study of the classics of Western civilization—to two contemporary movements. One is multiculturalism's dreary insistence that every group—ethnic, racial, sexual, and social—produces its own equally valid culture. The other is contemporary progressivism's thoroughly disingenuous belief that every individual is, or ought to be, the author of his or her own equally worthy morality. Steadily seeping into popular culture, these elite dogmas sow division, foster hostility to the principles of freedom, and vilify the virtues that undergird liberal democracy.

Another issue on which the question of character figures prominently concerns the position of Jews in liberal democracy, a recurring theme in Himmelfarb's work. She particularly admires a speech delivered in the House of Commons by Benjamin Disraeli. The only person of Jewish descent to serve as a British prime minister, Disraeli argued that Jews should be admitted to parliament not only on the grounds of religious liberty but also because Christianity was a Jewish creation—and because a Jew was "sustained by the divine law he obeys, and by the sublime morality he professes." In the second-longest chapter in this volume, "Victorian Values, Jewish Values," Himmelfarb presents the case, laid out by none other than the socialist reformer Beatrice Webb, that Judaism fosters the virtues—"hard work, diligence, thrift, responsibility, civility, devotion to family, respect for law and order"—essential to free and democratic societies.

The third great theme in Himmelfarb's writings—the chronic disorders of liberal democracy and the balancing and blending of moral principles, civic associations, and political institutions necessary to overcome them—appears most prominently in "Democratic Disorders and Democratic Remedies," a 1998 essay originally published in the *Public Interest*. The moral and cultural afflictions she identifies in this chapter, the volume's longest, remain as potent and insidious as ever: "the collapse of ethical principles and habits, the loss of respect for authorities and institutions, the breakdown of the family, the decline of civility, the vulgarization of high culture, and the degradation of popular culture."

To cure, or at least contain, these afflictions, many conservatives contended in the 1990s, as many continue to do today, that it is necessary to fortify civil society: families, neighborhoods, and the multiplicity of voluntary or intermediate associations located between the individual and the state that serve as the "seedbeds of virtue." Himmelfarb embraces the civil-society argument, but the problem, she sagely observes, is graver than its proponents typically perceive. Now as then, "much of civil society has been infected by the same virus that produced that disease: the ethical and cultural relativism that reduces all values, all standards, and all authority to expressions of personal will and inclination."

According to Himmelfarb, postmodernism aggravates the reductionism and relativism that have haunted liberal modernity from the beginning. It reduces language and morality to expressions of sheer power, repudiates objectivity, denies the very idea of truth—and then

has the spectacular effrontery to insist that its denial of a rational ethics, fixed natures, and universal principles yields unequivocal moral judgments that should be imposed by law.

Transgenderism, Himmelfarb argues in the book's final chapter, is postmodernist moralism in its most advanced iteration. With the assistance of advanced medical technology like hormonal treatments and genital surgery, the transgenderism crusade moves beyond deconstructing texts and ideas to deconstructing human nature itself. At the same time, it seeks to expand state power by contradictorily demanding recognition of transgenderism as the most urgent issue of human and civil rights. If transgender activists do not explicitly appeal to the tenets of postmodernism, it is only because the spirit of that validating ideology has been, as Himmelfarb writes, so thoroughly "integrated into the culture that it no longer needs affirming or confronting."

A historian and not a policy wonk, Gertrude Himmelfarb does not prescribe elaborate measures for overcoming the pathologies of postmodernism. But her marvelous historical studies provide models of intellectual, moral, and political excellence that can and should inform policy making at every level. Anyone in search of the virtues that must be summoned to meet this challenge need only consult the luminous intelligence and exquisite craft that inform every page of this necessary volume.