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The radicalisations of collective identities triggered by postmodernity

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Abstract:

Postmodernism emerged as a reaction to the principles of the Enlightenment, rejecting the existence of universal truths and replacing them with relativism and a skepticism that challenged any form of objective knowledge. As a consequence, these dynamic fosters identity-based differences and social fragmentation. It also generates imagined communities and mass collectives that operate via emotion and confrontation, reinforced by a digital society and open information networks. The result of this, is an erosion of social containment structures that once mitigated conflict, making democratic deliberation increasingly difficult. This identity fragmentation constitutes a strategic vulnerability that revisionist states can exploit within the cognitive domain, particularly in hybrid scenarios where influencing the population is more effective than direct military confrontation. The loss of a shared “we” and the proliferation of radicalised identities weaken national cohesion and hinder responses to external aggression.

Keywords:

Posmodernism, identity, modernism, relativism, the enlightenment, cognitive.

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Introduction

Postmodernism identifies a crisis within the modern era that leads it to question the organisation of Western societies. This is built upon the principles of the Enlightenment. Its origins lie in Nietzsche's radical critique (that of challenging truth, morality, and Western metaphysics) and in Heidegger's denunciation of the metaphysics of presence and the primacy of technical reason. Together, they combine a tradition marked by distrust toward objective truth and universal rationality. Today, strategic competition among global actors is no longer a mere linear confrontation of military capabilities. From the perspective of revisionist states, it is far more efficient to employ other instruments—such as influencing minority communities found within open information environments. The approach of basing deterrence in a catalogue of military capabilities, and in the willingness to employ them, has limited utility in hybrid strategies or in what is commonly referred to as the grey zone.

Contemporary models of confrontation and competition are significantly more complex, though they continue to follow the same logic of exploiting adversarial vulnerabilities. The military operational environment—now understood as a space of confrontation—extends into the cognitive domain and, with it, into open information environments. These societies suffer from serious vulnerabilities when exposed to external actors seeking to influence populations in pursuit of political objectives. The radicalisation of a collective is laborious but relatively straightforward. Postmodernity facilitates such radicalisation by shielding identities and reinforcing recognition, particularly among the most marginalised—who are often more prone to resort to violence. Society becomes polarised, cohesion is lost, undermining any action framed within National Security. This article outlines the vulnerability of plural and open information environments that embrace postmodernism and have become particularly prone to external actions aimed at fracturing the spaces of understanding essential to any democracy. These dynamics may even generate multiple arenas of confrontation, sedimented in collective identities with a high degree of tyranny.

Postmodernity¹

Modernity is understood as the scientific method and the instrument that enables us to comprehend and construct reality. This construction is carried out and legitimised by the powers of the State, conceived as the supreme actor responsible for shaping the organisation of a society.

Postmodernity², by contrast, is a movement—marked by numerous strands³—that rejects modernity and its principal elements: faith in reason and science as universal foundations and as engines of progress. This normative framework is itself rooted in the Enlightenment.

Postmodernity rests on the assumption that modernity is a failed project, an easy conclusion to reach when observing today's landscape of conflicts. The postmodern condition emerges as a reactionary response to representative models of power⁴, grounded in modernity, which have not succeeded in producing a better world. This critique is directed particularly at the situation of minorities, one of the central concerns of postmodern thought.

The cornerstone of postmodern thinking is permanent scepticism and relativism, especially a notion that once appeared indisputable: that knowledge generates progress and, consequently, a higher degree of human emancipation. «The principal objective is to erase boundaries and situate oneself within a disoriented relativism in which fluidity and undefinition prevail, and everything becomes blurred»⁵.

¹ Postmodernity is a highly heterogeneous movement, with a multitude of authors who have written about it—for example, Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Jameson, Butler, Vattimo, Rorty, Beck, Giddens, or Debord. This article does not aim to explain each of the different lines of thought, but rather to compile their principal arguments.

² Similar concepts to postmodernity have been developed by Bauman, such as liquid modernity; by Giddens, with his notion of radicalized modernity; and by Toynbee, with his idea of ultramodern culture.

³ The term postmodernity is difficult to define, for although it originates within philosophy, it soon becomes established in sociology and later expands its sphere of influence openly into economics and, most notably, into culture.

⁴ VATTIMO, Gianni. *La Sociedad transparente*. Barcelona, Paidós, 1990.

⁵ BURGAYA, Josep. *La razón y sus enemigos: Una defensa de la democracia liberal*. Madrid, Catarata, 2025, p.122.

Postmodern thinkers hold that reality is the product of what they term as *metanarratives*⁶—grand cultural, political, scientific, or religious narratives that organise our understanding of the world. These *metanarratives* generate reality and are legitimised through language. Moreover, they argue that the world has been shaped on the basis of such metanarratives, which decisively influence our culture and permeate every aspect of life. These narratives structure public life according to the interests of the powerful, leading, in Lyotard's words, to «an incredulity toward metanarratives»⁷.

In this way, reality becomes socially constructed, governed by discourses derived from *metanarratives* imposed by dominant actors. Objective reality is denied and displaced into subjective human perceptions; the postmodern proposition is that there is no truth other than that of the individual. Contemporary knowledge (and therefore truth) is always a product imposed by the sphere of power. The postmodern stance champions the triumph of opinion over knowledge, invention over facts, and emotion over reason.

Individual identity is stimulated when it is constructed upon the fallacies of a collective (at times influenced from abroad) that hides behind the digital information environment. In the words of Ferraris, «we are confronted with a liberation of truth»⁸; in reality, we face as many truths as individuals and with the liberation of truth comes the liberalisation of reality itself.

For a postmodern thinker, the conclusion is unequivocal: «universal truth does not exist, and thus we are condemned to relativism»⁹. This situation leads (following Derrida)¹⁰, to the deconstruction of any aspect related to modernity and the Enlightenment. Such a stance reaches even the very foundations upon which norms and laws in a constitutional State are built.

⁶ The principal thinker of postmodernity was Jean-François Lyotard, whose main theory is developed in his book *The Postmodern Condition*.

⁷ LYOTARD, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984.

⁸ FERRARIS, Maurizio. *Posverdad y otros enigmas*. Madrid, Alianza, 2019, p.43.

⁹ BUTLER, Christopher. *Posmodernidad. Una breve introducción*. Chile, Universidad Católica de Chile, 2020, p. 23.

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida was a French philosopher (1930–2004), one of the most important figures of postmodern thought. He was the creator of deconstruction, and his work constitutes one of the theoretical pillars of postmodern and post-structuralist thinking.

The most striking outcome is the status that history acquires for a postmodern thinker: it is regarded as mere fiction. One of the most prominent writers advancing this view is Alun Munslow¹¹, who argues that «the historian works with narrative in order to shape history, not with the reality of the past,” implying that history is always the product of “socially coded discursive practices»¹². Frederic Jameson is equally categorical when he speaks of «the disappearance of the sense of history»¹³. This raises the question of what becomes of customary law, understood as a body of legal norms that do not originate in written statutes but in customs, practices, and social usages that a community has followed consistently, over time, and with the conviction that they are binding. This leads to the possibility of denying history altogether, insofar as it is deemed an instrument of domination forged by the grand narratives of modernity, narratives that conceal ulterior motives. We could therefore argue at this point, it becomes conceivable to argue that Hitler committed no genocide, to negate Stalin’s ethnic purges, or to dispute what truly occurred when the Spanish arrived in the New World. In Hayden White’s words, «historical narratives are fantasies of language, whose content has been both created and found in equal measure, and whose form has more in common with literature than with the sciences»¹⁴.

Following Foucault, postmodernists amplify minority identity claims, arguing that power discourses have systematically silenced them. In the name of defending these minorities, the position of the majority is questioned, since it is presumed to be generated by *metanarratives* (understood as instruments of domination). Minority cultural circumstances are upheld without subjecting them to any form of consensus, thereby endorsing standpoint theory¹⁵, which maintains that knowledge depends on the culture

¹¹ MUNSLOW, Alun. *Deconstructing History* (2nd ed.). New York, Routledge. 2006.

¹² BURGAYA, Josep. *La razón y sus enemigos: Una defensa de la democracia liberal*. Madrid: Catarata. 2025.

¹³ JAMESON, Frederic.. *El posmodernismo o la lógica cultural del capitalismo avanzado*. Barcelona, Paidós, 1996.

¹⁴ WHITE, Hayden. *El texto histórico como artefacto literario*. En H. White, *El texto histórico como artefacto literario y otros escritos*. 2003, pp. 27–51.

¹⁵ The principal driving force and creator of this theory has been Sandra Harding, through her two foundational works *The Science Question in Feminism* and its subsequent development in *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?*. In both, she argues that knowledge is not neutral but situated within specific social positions.

developed in a specific context. No absolute realities exist, because everything depends on the social construction driven by the prevailing structure of power.

The instrumentalization of language as a mechanism of domination rather than understanding, inhibits dialectics, one of the foundations of democracy—namely, the ability to reach agreements. Postmodernists believe that nothing is gained through discussion; the very idea of an adversary is deemed toxic, as it is presumed to be abducted by the *metanarratives* of power structures.

In such a context, resolving conflicts between communities becomes exceedingly difficult, as the imposition of a minority's proposals appears to be the only viable path. When spaces for discussion do emerge, postmodernists adopt a victimist stance, alleging offence or aggression. Their strategy consists of demanding compassion, even though this is precisely what they most lack in respecting the norms upheld by the majority.

Yet they do not deny that communication is essential for transforming society; indeed, «communication is subordinated without restriction to the hegemonic power of global multimedia networks»¹⁶. In open social-media environments, characterised by minimal information control, the capacity to influence societies becomes a decisive mechanism for shaping knowledge within a world in which everything is relative.

Identity's Complex Construct

The psychoanalyst Erikson conceived the term identity as «a feeling of sameness and continuity experienced by an individual as such»¹⁷. Individual identity refers to the perception one has of oneself—emerging when one asks «who am I?», when one wonders whether one is different from others, and what precisely constitutes that difference in relation to them.

Human beings tend to be subjective in their perceptions, for these are built upon their experiences and upon their own reality. Stimulating such thinking is relatively easy; when it is encouraged, it generates strong affinity, even when that personal reality is clearly and markedly detached from what the wider community considers to be true.

¹⁶ CASTELLS, Manuel. *Communication Power*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2009.

¹⁷ ERIKSON, Erik. *La identidad psicosocial*, Enciclopedia Internacionales de las Ciencias Sociales, tomo V. España, Aguilar, 1977. p. 586.

Postmodern thought is comfortable amplifying difference, rapidly establishing a duality between us and them, between the virtuous and the wicked. Its proposition of breaking with the *status quo* (including reality and truth) opens the way to a proliferation of reality and, with it, a world of individual identities seeking meaning for their own thinking. This situation offers a cognitive refuge for many individuals, sustained by the fluidity derived from relativism and scepticism. In this manner, a sphere of comfort is generated, something that is particularly attractive to those searching for alternative interpretive frameworks.

In this sense, identity is an extension of the self, but it is also the individual's identification with others whom they perceive as similar: "the idea of identity presupposes the idea of truth, of authenticity, since identity means, above all, being identical to oneself." Within this logic, equals are those who share traits that distinguish them from others; this is what we might call a *differentiated sameness*. The concept of identity intrinsically entails the marking of differences: «identity is a predicate that has a particular function, through which a given thing or object is distinguished as such from others of its same kind»¹⁸.

In postmodern societies, difference is valued insofar as it is regarded as an element of exclusivity, regardless of the nature of the dissent. All opinions are deemed valid because it is assumed that their construction may arise from a social context not shared by the majority. Far from harmonising differences, the postmodern stance expands the surface of confrontation within diverse communities, generating irreconcilable fractures—often because its wager is, by definition, transgressive. «We must relearn how to defend equality, and not mere diversity»¹⁹.

This confrontation becomes evident in the experience of living alongside others: «self-recognition implies recognising oneself as a member of a group; which in turn allows one to differentiate oneself from the members of other groups»²⁰. Identities are therefore shaped in opposition to others, who serve as a constant point of reference in the formation of our own identity. The concept of identity encompasses both belonging to a collective and uniqueness—the internal recognition of being singular. Stimulating difference based

¹⁸ HABERMAS, Jürgen. *Teoría de la acción comunicativa*. Madrid, Taurus, 1987, p.145.

¹⁹ FOUREST, Catherine. *Generación ofendida. De la policía cultural a la policía del pensamiento*. Barcelona, Península, 2021.

²⁰ MERCADO, Asael., & HERNÁNDEZ, Alejandrina. «El proceso de construcción de la identidad colectiva». *Convergencia*, 17(53). 2010, p. 231.

on relativism is an imprudent exercise, for it may respond to arbitrary ideals. «This semantic ambiguity suggests that identity oscillates between similarity and difference»²¹. In postmodern environments, similarity is inhibited and the spirit of difference is magnified, particularly within minority groups.

Traditionally, identities have been formed around country, religion, or cultural factors; however, today other elements (initially less relevant) such as profession, minority affiliation, or sexual orientation have entered the equation. The selection of these elements leads to the formation of what Manuel Castells identifies as *resistance identities*:

«Generated by those actors who find themselves in devalued or stigmatised positions-conditions within the logic of domination, and who therefore construct trenches of resistance and survival based on principles different from, or opposed to, those that permeate the institutions»²².

The Instrumentalization of Collective Identities

Once an individual has acquired a particular identity, a coherent and compact organisation takes shape—usually within the global network. It becomes an *imagined community*, in Anderson's sense²³: «mental constructions shared by people who do not know one another, yet who imagine themselves as part of the same collective».

Normally, through language as a vehicular mechanism, the individual is granted recognition as a member of the collective. Finally—after many years wandering in the desert with a deeply idiosyncratic worldview—an individual finds their ideas reflected and

²¹ LIPIANSKI, Edmon Mark. «L'identité personnelle» en VV.AA, *L'identité*. París: Ed Sciences Hamnes. 1999, p. 22.

²² CASTELLS, Manuel. *La era de la información, El poder de la identidad*. Madrid, Editorial, 1997.

²³ ANDERSON, Benedict. *Comunidades imaginadas: Reflexiones sobre el origen y la difusión del nacionalismo*. Madrid, Fondo de Cultura Europea, 1993.

affirmed. Consequently, communities such as *flat-earthers*, *furries*²⁴, or *therians*²⁵ emerge everywhere.

The guardians of postmodernity demand respect for these communities, among other reasons because they have allegedly been unjustly silenced for many years. But they do not stop there: they call for regulations of every kind to protect them from the actions of justice, the rule of law, or even the simple indifference of the wider collective. How can one fail to be sensitive to a person who feels like a cat, yet is not a cat when looking in the mirror?

From an anthropological perspective, collective identity is a set of properties and characteristics shared by a given group of individuals who identify with it. These properties and characteristics may change and evolve over time and in response to events; hence, they are dynamic. One of «the most important common denominators is that it is considered something constructed, dynamic, and learned, rather than something natural, fixed, or of divine origin»²⁶. The ecosystem generated online enables the governance of these identities toward more violent spaces, particularly when people fail to understand their claims.

Belonging to a human group, as well as the configuration of personal identity, is socially constructed and today these communities are primarily virtual. The formation of a specific identity is a dynamic and unfinished process, socially shaped over time through interactions that influence our identity, both collective and individual, throughout life. In the case of *therians*, they feel comfortable being cats and demand cat parks in which they may roam freely, since they pay taxes like everyone else. Clearly, this must be a priority policy for the municipal authorities. There have always been people who believed

²⁴ These are communities that enjoy adopting anthropomorphic personalities; they do not wish to be animals, but they feel comfortable assuming animal forms with human characteristics. In 2024, the corporation ExpertBeacon estimated that more than one and a half million furries existed worldwide, with the United States leading the geographical distribution at 34 percent. Information available at ExpertBeacon furry demographics. https://expertbeacon.com/how-many-furries-are-in-the-world/?utm_source=copilot.com#google_vignette.

²⁵ These are individuals who feel a deep identification with a specific animal (wolf, feline, bird, etc.). They do not believe themselves to be biologically animals; rather, they experience their psychological or spiritual identity in that manner. But we also find the Otherkin: individuals who identify as broader non-human entities, such as dragons or spirits.

²⁶ PRUTSCH, Markus Joseph. Research for the European Commission CULT – European Identity, European Parliament, Bruselas. 2017, p. 10.

themselves to be cats, but power structures have silenced them. It is, as members of that feline-collective identity would argue, a matter of social justice.

In this search for collective identities, we cannot overlook the importance of communication, as an essential element in the formation of what has been called cultural globalisation. Social media stimulates the creation of parallel cultures through information platforms; therefore, there are groups who feel identified with others whom they do not know and have never even seen. The paradigm of these communities with their own identities is found in memes, for example, constructed from a simple drawing, yet endowed with a remarkable capacity for leadership over a community that identifies with what the meme proposes.

In this way, what Gustave Le Bon termed mass collectives are generated: «the fact that they have been transformed into a mass, places them in possession of a kind of collective mind that makes them feel, think, and act in a manner quite different from how each individual would feel, think, and act if isolated»²⁷. A mass-person can engage in violent actions that they would never undertake individually. Masked beneath the collective, they lose attribution for their acts, for it is, in effect, the community of the acting subject that has acted, not the individual himself.

In a society permanently angered by a multitude of issues, one may wonder which scenario is more likely: feeling like a cat or considering democracy an oppressive instrument of a people governed by large economic corporations. If the answer tends toward the latter, we must reconsider the capacity of external actors to radicalise collectives through the global network. Who knows, perhaps we might one day encounter a Robin Hood who defends us from democracy or from the rule of law.

As Ortega y Gasset observed, «the mass abandons its traditional place and occupies spaces previously reserved for select minorities: politics, culture, science, social leadership. This occupation is not democratic but imposing, for the mass recognises neither limits nor competencies»²⁸. It is not only imposing outwardly but also inwardly, in

²⁷ LE BON, Gustave. (2009). *La psicología de las masas*. Madrid, Editorial, 2009, p. 25.

²⁸ ORTEGA Y GASSET, José. *La rebelión de las masas*. Madrid, Espasa-Calpe, 2005.

accordance with the spiral of silence²⁹, which forces the alignment of the group so that individuals may feel part of it and avoid exclusion.

In the correspondence³⁰ between Einstein and Freud after the disasters of war (when the scientist wondered how human beings could be so perverse) Freud replied that two fundamental drivers exist within the human being: *Eros* (life, union, love) and *Thanatos* (death, destruction, aggression). Both drivers coexist and are equally powerful. Aggressiveness is not a cultural accident but a force as primordial as love. War is nothing but a collective expression of Thanatos when the structures of containment fail. In earlier times, the structure of containment was the immediate community, capable of tempering an individual's extravagant ideas; now the internet has destroyed those structures. One will always find a virtual collective that supports one's ideas, one's reality, and one's truth.

Postmodernism erodes these structures of containment, multiplying the claim that all opinions are worthy of respect. It takes only a slight influence in any given direction for negative drivers to grow.

Conclusions

For quite some time, revisionist states have reached the conclusion that conventional conflict (grounded in a linear confrontation of military capabilities) will not allow them to achieve their strategic objectives. In scenarios of strategic competition, the use of such military capabilities is inhibited, and the emphasis shifts toward challenges that contemporary military deontology cannot resolve, at least as of today. These are scenarios marked by a high degree of hybridisation, meticulously designed to avoid escalation through military instruments.

One of the areas offering the greatest opportunities (and exploiting the vulnerabilities of Western countries) is the cognitive domain and the new arena of confrontation that includes the human mind. Among these possibilities emerges the capacity to fracture societal cohesion through postmodern premises that privilege autarkic dissent, which inhibits thought itself, a necessary condition for deliberation and for proposing societal improvements grounded in dialectics.

²⁹ NOELLE-NEUMANN, Elisabeth. *The spiral of silence: Public opinion – Our social skin*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980.

³⁰ FREUD, Sigmund, EINSTEIN, Albert. *¿Porqué la guerra?*. Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 2006.

The loss of the notion of a *we*, replaced by a multitude of *Is* and their claims, erodes the foundation upon which the democratic system has been built. Truth and reality become fluid, distorting our system of priorities and values, ultimately undermining one of the fundamental pillars of national security: cohesion in supporting a response to aggression.

The functioning of our rule of law has always required the existence of free citizens with adequate access to truthful information, but also the development of spaces of sociability, spheres of deliberation and discussion (including disputes) necessary for establishing the consensuses upon which societal norms are built. Postmodernism severely hinders this social harmony and generates numerous arenas of confrontation based on relativism and individualised thinking.

The generation of collective identities, externally influenced and grounded in postmodern premises, constitutes a clear vulnerability that must be confronted. We cannot satisfy the demands of diversity at the expense of the collective; ultimately, tensions arise that cause the pendulum of aggressiveness to swing more sharply each year. A fluid version of truth advocated by relativism will not allow conflicts to be resolved. On the contrary, references and criteria of arbitration disappear, exacerbating social conflict. Externally, from within an information society, stimulating this fragmentation is simple, though laborious, and undoubtedly makes us weaker as a nation.

This is not about curtailing any freedom; rather, it is about guaranteeing the freedoms of the collective, which must not be subordinated to minorities. But it is about much more than that: at stake is the defence of the free thought of our societies, grounded in the provision of truthful information that enables citizens to make their own decisions—democracy in its purest form.

External influence, channelled through the internet, in shaping the thinking of our citizens (when the principles of democracy are deemed under threat) must be countered with the full strength of the rule of law, supported by all national and international instruments of power, including the Armed Forces.

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