Postmodernism: History and Diagnosis

By Jordan B. Peterson and Stephen R. C. Hicks

Discussion on August 17, 2017. Posted on August 18, 2017: https://youtu.be/oyzSrtr6oJE.

TRANSCRIPTION by Paula Nedved (mter2013@gmail.com).

JBP: Well, I'm speaking today with Dr. Stephen Hicks, who is a professor of philosophy in the Department of Philosophy at Rockford University in Illinois. Professor Hicks has written a book—he's written several books—but he's written one in particular that I wanted to talk to him about today called *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault*, which was published a fair while ago now, in 2004, but I think has become even more pertinent and relevant today.

I have talked a lot to my viewers about your book, and so let's talk about Postmodernism and its relationship with Neo-Marxism. So maybe you could tell the viewers here a little more about yourself and how you got interested in this.

SH: Well, I finished graduate school in philosophy in the early 90s, originally from Canada, born in Toronto. At that point Pittsburgh and Indiana had the two strongest philosophy of science and logic programs, and that's what I was interested in at the time. And so upon a professor's recommendation, I ended up at Indiana, and it worked out very nicely for me.

So most of my graduate work was actually in epistemology, philosophy of science, logic, some cognitive science issues as well. So a lot of the epistemological and philosophical/linguistic issues that come up in Postmodernism—the groundwork so to speak was laid for that.

When I finished grad school and started teaching full-time, came to Rockford University. I was teaching in an honors program, and the way that program worked was—it was essentially a Great Books program—and so it was like getting a second education, wonderfully. But the way it was done was that each course was taught by two professors to our honor students. So the professors would be from different departments, so I was paired with literature professors, history professors, and so on. And this was now the middle of the 90s.

I started to hear about thinkers I had not read. I'd kind-of heard about them, but now I was reading them more closely and finding that in history and literature and sociology and anthropology, names like Derrida and Foucault and the others, if not omnipresent, were huge names. So I realized I had a gap in my education to fill. So I started reading deeply in them.

My education in some ways was broad in the history of philosophy but narrow at the graduate school level and I had focused mostly on Anglo-American philosophy, so my understanding of the Continental traditions was quite limited. But by the time I got to the end of the 90s, I realized there was something significant going on coming out of Continental philosophy. And that's where the book [published 2004] came out of.

JBP: When you say *significant*, what do you mean by that? Do you mean intellectually? Do you mean socially? Politically? There's lots of different variants of "significant."

SH: At that point, "intellectually." This was still in the 1990s so postmodernism was not yet (outside of, say, art) a cultural force, but it was strongly an *intellectual* force in that. At that point, young Ph.D.s coming out of sociology, literary criticism, some sub-disciplines in the law (if you're getting Ph.D. in the law), historiography and so on, and certainly in departments in philosophy still dominated by Continental traditional philosophy: almost all of them are primarily being schooled in what we now call postmodern thinkers, so the leading gurus are people like Derrida, Lyotard, from whom we get the label *post-modern condition*, Foucault and the others.

JBP: So maybe you could walk us through what you learned, because people are unfamiliar ... I mean, you were advanced in your education, including in philosophy, and still recognized your ignorance, say, with regards to postmodern thinking, so that's obviously a condition that is shared by a large number of people. *Postmodernism* is one of those words like *Existentialism* that covers an awful lot of territory, and so maybe we could zero in on exactly what that means, and who these thinkers were: Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard, and what you learned about them.

SH: [5:00] Fair enough. Well, all of the thinkers you just named—they think broadly, they think strategically, and they do have a very strong historical perspective on their disciplines, and at the same time they are trying to assess where they think we are culturally, politically, socially—and all of them are making a very dramatic claim: that to some extent or in some way Modernism has either ended or it has reached its nadir, or all of the … kind of the pathologies and negative traits within the modern world are reaching a culmination in their generation, and so it's time for us to both recognize that Modernism has come to an end, and that we need some sort of new intellectual framework, a *post*-modern-like framework.

JBP: And the Modernism that they're criticizing, how would you characterize that? That's Enlightenment values? Scientific rationalism? How would you characterize it, exactly?

SH: All of those would be elements of it. But then of course there are some discipline-specific differences: so literature people and philosophy people and historians will use *Modernism* slightly differently. But the idea at core is that if you look at the pre-modern world— essentially the world of the Middle Ages, say—that that was itself broken up by a series of revolutions: the Renaissance, Reformation, Counter Reformation, early scientific revolutions—and all of this is going on in historically short chunks of time: 1500s and 1600s.

And so if you look at both the intellectual world and the social world, comparing, say, the 1400s with the 1700s, culturally and intellectually you're in a different universe at that point.

So the features then of the modern world—now I'm going to use my philosophical labels here—are that we are now *naturalistic* in our thinking. We are no longer primarily *supernaturalistic* in our thinking. So we might still be open to the idea that there's a God or some sort of supernatural dimension, the way Deists are, but first and foremost we're taking the natural world as a more or less self-contained, self-governing world that operates according to cause and effect, and we're going to study it in *its* terms.

We're not seeing the natural world as derivative of a "higher" world or that everything that happens in the natural world is part of "God's plan" where we read omens and so forth into

everything.

So metaphysically then there's been a revolution: We're naturalistic.

Epistemologically—in terms of knowledge—there also has been a revolution. How do we know the important truths? How do we acquire the beliefs that we're fundamentally going to commit our lives to? Well, by the time we become Moderns we take experience seriously, personal experience. We do that more rigorously and we're developing scientific method (the way of organizing the data), we're taking logic and all the sophisticated tools of rationality and developing those increasingly ...

And so our opposition then is: Either you know something because you can experience it and verify it for yourself, or we've done the really hard work of scientific method and as a result of what comes out of that, that's what we can call knowledge or our best approximation to that.

And that's also revolutionary because the prior intellectual framework was much more intellectually authoritarian in its framework. You would accept in the Catholic tradition the authority of the Church. And who are you to question the authority of the Church? And who are you to mouth empirical-rational arguments against the authority of the Church?

Or, you take the authority of Scripture, or you accept on faith that you've had a mystical revelation of some sort.

So, in all of those cases you have non-rational epistemologies that are dominating intellectual discourse. That is all by and large swept away in the modern world.

JBP: Okay, so prior to the emergence of the modern world, we'll say, people are dominated essentially by their willingness to adhere to a shared tradition and that shared tradition is somewhat tyrannically enforced. But there's no real alternative in terms of epistemology [*epistemology: the theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity and scope: the investigation of what distinguishes justified belief from opinion*] let's say. And then as the modern world emerges, people discover the technologies of science and the value of rigorously applied method and the comparison of shared experiences and that makes us technologically powerful in a new way and philosophically different from what we were before.]

SH: [10:00] Yes, the *shared tradition* phrase that you added there, that's an important one. So I'd say in the early modern world there's not necessarily a skepticism about shared traditions—so there would be an acceptance of shared traditions—but the idea is that you would not *uncritically* accept your tradition. You may accept your tradition, but only after you've thought it through and made your own independent judgment.

JBP: Okay, okay, so you're elevated to the status of someone who's capable of taking a stance with regards to the tradition, and assessing its presuppositions and so forth.

SH: Absolutely.

JBP: So there's an elevation of the individual and the critical intellect along with the elaboration of the scientific method. Okay, so then we might note, perhaps, that that's a

tremendously effective transformation, although maybe it leads in a somewhat nihilistic direction metaphysically—we can leave that to the side. But it's a very, very successful revolution, because by the time, at least the beginning of the 20th century comes along, there's this staggering (and of course before that, the Industrial Revolution), there's this staggering transformation of technology and technological and conceptual power, and then a stunning increase in the standard of living. And that starts at about 1890, to really move exponentially in the 1890s, or at least to get to the really steep part of the exponential curve. Okay, so that seems to be going well.

So what is it that the postmodernists are objecting to precisely?

SH: Just on those two issues: (1) the metaphysical naturalism, and then (2) the elevation of kind of a critical empiricism and a belief that we can, through science—even not necessarily a science, but social scientists and so on—we can come to understand powerful general principles about humanity and social systems.

Those two revolutions both are then subjected to counter-attacks.

And again, what happens in this case is there is a revolution. Probably by the time we get to 1800—the height of the Enlightenment—there are the beginnings of more powerful skeptical traditions that come to be developed, so thinkers are starting to say things like: Well, if scientific method at root is based on the evidence of the senses—we observe the natural world: that's our first point of contact—and then on the basis of that we form *abstractions*, and then we put those abstractions into *propositions*, and then we take those propositions and put them in networks that we call *theories*, and so on—so we start to critically examine each of the elements of scientific method, and over time, weaknesses in the existing accounts of how all of those "rational operations" work come to be teased out, and philosophy then starts to go down a more skeptical path.

So if, for example, you take perception as fundamental—it's you know, the individual subject's first point of contact with the natural world—then you have to immediately deal with issues of perceptual illusions, or the possibility that people will have hallucinations, or that the way *you* report your perceptual experience is at odds with how *I* report *my* perceptual experience.

JBP: Tell me if I've got this right. So, with the dawning of the "Empirical Age," let's say, there's this idea that you can derive valid information from sense data—especially if you contrast that sense data rigorously with that of others—okay? So that's sort of the foundation for the scientific method in some sense.

But then—I think this is with Immanuel Kant—there's an objection to that, which is that, Well, you can't make the presupposition that that sense data enters your cognitive apparatus, your apparatus of understanding, without a priori structuring, and it seems to me that that's where the postmodernists really go after the modernists. It's that, given that you have to have a very complex perceptual structure (that modern people might say was instantiated as a consequence of biological evolution), you can't make the case that what you're receiving from the external world is something like "pure information": it's always subject—to some very-difficult-to-delimit degree—to "interpretation."

And then you also have to take into account the *fact* of that a priori structure and what it might mean for your concept of "objective reality." And that's Kant, I think, if I've got that right.

SH: Right. Well, the postmodernists will use both of those strategies: (1) the anti-empiricist strategy, and (2) the anti-rationalist strategy. And what's important about Kant is that Kant is integrating both of those "anti" strategies. So in the generations before Kant, the skeptical arguments about perception which were directed against the empiricists … the empiricists want to say that everything is based on observational data, but then if you don't have good answers about hallucinations and relativity and illusions and so forth, then it seems like your intellectual structure, whatever it seems to be, if it's based on probabilistic or possibly faulty perceptual data—then the whole thing is a tottering mess. [*Empiricism: the theory stating that knowledge comes only or primarily from sensory experience. Empirical research, including experiments and validated measurement tools, guide the scientific method.*]

And by the time we get to Kant, the Empiricist tradition is largely unable to respond to those kinds of objections. And so Kant is recognizing and saying: All right, we've been trying now for a couple of centuries, we haven't been able to do so successfully—we're not *going* to be able to do so.

[15:43] Now, you also nicely emphasized that one of the other responses had been on the Rationalist side, which is to say, "Well, no you don't start with pure empirical data—instead we do have perhaps some innate a priori structures built into the human mind—how they got there, maybe they're put there by God, maybe they're put there naturalistically or whatever— but what enables us to have legitimate knowledge is that our empirical data comes in and it is filtered and structured by these pre-existing cognitive structures as well."

Now the problem with that side of the line—and this is also well worked out by the time you get to the Kantians—is to say: Well, if you're starting with in-built cognitive structures, and everything that comes in, so to speak, goes through this structuring machine and you're aware of the outputs—because that's what is presented to your mind—well how do you know those in-built structures have anything to do with the way reality actually *is* out there?

It seems like then what you are stuck with is the end result of a subjective processing, and there is no way for you, so to speak, to "jump outside of your head" to compare the end result with the way the world actually *is*, independently of how your mind has structured the awareness.

So once again, you're stuck in a rather subjective place.

And again, the importance of Kant here is then he's also looking at this more Rationalist tradition and he's saying, Well look, again we've been trying now for a couple of centuries to work these things out from Descartes to Spinoza, Leibniz and the others, and Rationalism also has reached a dead end, so we're not going to be able to do so.

So Kant is, in effect, standing at the end of these two traditions and saying, "You know, the skeptics have it right on both sides: both the Empiricist and the Rationalist traditions fail. There is no way for us to objectively come to know an external reality. We're stuck in some sort of deep subjectivism."

JBP: Okay, so I don't know now whether to talk a little bit about the American Pragmatic approach to that, or whether to ... Maybe we should go ahead and continue our discussion of the postmodernists, because they're developing these claims.

SH: Absolutely, and some of the postmodernists do describe themselves as Neo-Pragmatists, like Richard Rorty for example. So yes, that's exactly a direction that's worth going.

JBP: Okay, okay. So my understanding of that, if I was going to defend the Modernist tradition, let's say, I would say that we have instantiated within us an a priori perceptual structure that's a consequence of millions—billions of years for that matter—of biological evolution, and it has emerged in tandem with continual correction of its presuppositions by the selection process. But it's still subject to error because we have a very limited viewpoint as specific individuals, and not only are we limited, but we can also make, you might say, moral errors, and I'll get back to that, that cloud our judgment.

And so, in an attempt to "expand our purview" and rectify those errors, we do two things: (1) We test our hypothesis practically against the world, which is to say, we say, "Here's a theory of reality." We act it out. If the theory of reality is sufficiently correct, when we act it out, we get what we want, and then that's sufficient proof for the validity of the theory. It's not absolute proof, but it's sufficient proof. And then the other thing we do (and I think this has been paid attention to much less except by thinkers such as Piaget) is that: (2) We further constrain our presuppositions about reality with the necessity of constructing theories that are also acceptable to the people around us.

So they have to be integrate-able within the currently existing social contract, and they have to be functionally appropriate in the external world.

And that's a nice set of constraints, and it seems to me that that, at least in some part, goes a long ways to answering the objections to the limits of the scientific method that have been discussed historically, and which you just summarized.

SH: [20:09] All right, I'm sympathetic to much of what you just went through. In fact a five-point response to the kinds of arguments that have been laid out, where you're actually putting me in the position then of defending the postmodern tradition about how it would undercut each of those components.

So, if you take for example evolutionary epistemology [*epistemology: investigation into the origin, nature, methods and limits of human knowledge*], and you gave a nice sketch of one standard evolutionary epistemological frame in which you say: Maybe we have in-built a priori structures, but we can rely upon them because here we are standing at the long end of hundreds of thousands or millions of years of evolution, and they would not have survived or enabled us to survive had they not served some sort of reliable cognitive role in accurately representing the way the world works.

This is actually too early for the postmoderns, although the postmoderns will agree with this. This is to say that all of that kind of begs the question in a very deep way against the kind of skeptical objections that we're raising. Because in order to make that paragraph-long

description of what evolutionary epistemology is, what I have to do is take for granted basic assumptions, certain truths about the world: that, for example, there is an external world; that we are biological creatures; that we have in-built structures; that those structures are evolutionarily responsive and conditioned by changing forces; and so forth.

And if you take those assumptions to be true, then as a consequence or as a conclusion, you can infer that therefore the intellectual products that come out of our cognitive processing are reliable.

But where did you get those four premises from? How do you know that there is an external world? How do you know that we are biological creatures? How do you know that evolution is true, with all of the historical knowledge that's necessary to reach the conclusion that evolution is true? All of that presupposes that we have legitimate cognitive methods to come to understand the world. But our having legitimate cognitive processes to understand the world—that's exactly what we are arguing about in the first place, and you can't just assume that, for then the sake of coming up with some premises that are then in turn going to validate those cognitive processes.

So something like that they will say is a big circle or a circular-reasoning problem that evolutionary epistemology finds itself trapped in.

Now I think that there are some responses to *that*, and this is just the first "back and forth" on that particular debate. But that is the kind of response that would be there.

The third and fourth response (if I'm keeping track accurately) is to say that we also have constraints with respect to ourselves: that if we have a certain set of hypotheses or a certain set of theories and we're testing them out, we will accept those that give us "what we want," what *I want*, so to speak.

And I'm also necessarily in a social situation so what I need to do is check my results against the results of others: peer review, experiment replication and so forth.

JBP: [smiles] ... ability to live in the same household ...

SH: [laughs] Yes, absolutely, right? More prosaically, "sharing our frameworks with others," right? And so on...

And so if, so to speak—and this is the more Pragmatist orientation—if we then say we have a theory or a set of principles or guidelines or whatever, and they *do* enable me successfully to navigate the world to get what *I* want, or they do enable me to navigate my social world to get *us* what *we* want—then they're reliable, true, or some sort of "success" label, epistemologically, that we're going to give to them.

JBP: Okay, so let me ask you a question about that. This is a place where I got augured in very badly with Sam Harris when we were discussing metaphysical presumptions. So you know—and I'm confused about this I would say to some degree conceptually because I'm a scientist and certainly operate most of the time under the presupposition of an "independent objective world"—but then I also have some difficulty with the idea that it's objective truth

within which all other truths are "nested." And that's something that Sam and the people that he represents in some sense are very dead set on insisting.

Now it seems to me though that the crux of the matter is something like "the method of proof." And this strikes me as very important because, "My theory is correct enough if, when I implement it, I get what I want" is *not* the same as the claim "My theory is true because it's in accordance with some independently existing objective world."

I mean, both of those things could exist at the same time, but I think the more appropriate claim to make with regards to human knowledge is something like its "biological functionality," which is that your knowledge is of sufficient accuracy (which is about the best you can hope for because of your fundamental ignorance) if, when you implement it, it reliably produces the results that are commensurate, say, with your continued existence.

Now it seems to me that that's a reasonable claim from a Darwinian perspective [Charles Darwin, 1809-1882] and it also seems to me that it's very much in keeping with the claims of the American Pragmatists. And I mean, it's not like they were radical postmodernists ...

SH: Right...

JBP: ...because they weren't. But they were trying to solve this problem to some degree of our fundamental ignorance and our inability to be certain about the nature of the reality that surrounds us.

SH: Yes, okay. Let's set aside Sam Harris's version of this and focus on the Pragmatist tradition here. So, no, you're absolutely right.

The Pragmatists, William James [1842-1910], John Dewey [1859-1952], and the others, late 1800s, early 1900s; they are coming a century after the Kantian revolution [Immanuel Kant, 1724-1804], after Hegelianism [G. W. F. Hegel, 1770-1831], and so forth—and so they are very much trying to solve this problem. One way—and this is kind of a very American way— is like: Look, maybe the problem with philosophy is that we have been too intellectualizing of cognition, that we're not just disembodied brains or disembodied minds that are trying to contemplate abstract truths in some other realm. Maybe what we need to do is understand the mind and cognition as a naturalistic process and that the purpose of knowledge is not to come up with these pure and beautiful Truths that are going to be kind of museum pieces that we will admire, but rather the purpose of knowledge is functional. The purpose of knowledge is to guide action. And so they will then hearken back to the earlier Baconian tradition that knowledge is not an end in itself. As Bacon put it, Francis Bacon [1561-1626]: *Knowledge is power*, and by its fruits, so to speak, is how you know its worth.

JBP: Right.

SH: And so what we then should do is to see that the test of truth is *not* whether it meets purely intellectual standards of logic and mathematics, but rather, when we put it into practice, when we act upon it, we actually get good results, or we want the results we want, or *I* get the results *I* want. And it can come in more individualistic form or more socialized form.

JBP: Right, because then we can get on with things, too. Like, despite our ignorance, in some sense.

SH: So there are two things which are being packaged here, right? One is to say that knowledge is functional. And that part I think is important and I think it's a very nice correction by the Pragmatists. It's not original with them but they are reemphasizing it in the 19th century. Knowledge needs to be put to the test and its ability to enable us to be pragmatic in the real world, is its test.

JBP: [28:59] There's a coda to that as well. And I think this is relevant to Thomas Kuhn's [1922-1996] discussion of scientific revolutions, because Kuhn is often read as positing a sequence of, in some sense, discontinuous revolutions, and that the conceptual structure that characterized one "epoch," let's say—like the Medieval epoch—was so totally different in its presuppositions from the conceptions that characterized the *next* epoch … that you can't even mediate between them in some sense.

Now the reason I'm bringing this up is because Kuhn is at least read as hypothesizing that there's not any necessary "progress" when you make leaps from one conceptual system to another. But if you take this *pragmatic* approach—the one that we've been outlining—it seems to me that you can say, Well, it's something like this: Your conceptions of the world are more *tool-like* than *objective-truth-like*, and tools can have a greater or lesser range of convenience. And so if you come up with a *really* good tool—which would also be something that would look objectively true, generally speaking—then that's something that you can use in almost every situation and it will never fail you. And I would think of something like Newtonian physics in that regard, or even more particularly, quantum mechanics, because it's *never* failed us.

And so it seems to me the Pragmatic approach in some sense allows you to have your cake and eat it too. You can posit a hierarchy of truths, moving towards *absolute* truth even, but also retain your belief in your own ignorance and not have to beat the drum too hard about the "eternal accuracy" of your objective presuppositions.

SH: Okay. Again I'm sympathetic I think with about 80 percent of that. But let me put my skeptical hat back on and say how the postmodernists or the critics of Pragmatism—critics really of first-generation Pragmatism—will respond to that. So if we then say: All of these cognitive results … I'm going to rephrase that.

JBP: Okay.

SH: So if we're going to assess all of our cognitive results or cognitive hypotheses in terms of their workability, or their "getting what I want" or "what we want," well then the big question we have to turn to is to say, *How do we judge whether something works?*

JBP: Yes.

9

SH: Or how do I say that, "It's *good* because I get what *I* want" or "We get what *we* want." Well, what is a "want"? And where did these "wants" come from? And why should we accept "wants" and "desires" and "achieving certain goals" as our bottom line, so to speak?

[31:50]

JBP: Right, okay. That's right. So you can start to question the framework, the validity of the framework within which you're constructing the answer.

SH: That's right. And at this point we're reading epistemology [*epistemology: the theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity and scope: the investigation of what distinguishes justified belief from opinion*] "neutrally" so to speak; and moving into normative issues, then the whole status of normative goals—ends and the means that are going to enable us to reach those ends—comes into play.

So if I want to say, "The most important thing is that I"—I'll put it very baldly here—"I get what I want," right? And I'm going to assess intellectual structures and beliefs and hypotheses in terms of, "Do they give me what I want?" Well, that sounds already sounds like a fairly normatively subjectivistic standpoint. Like, why should you take your "wants" as having some sort of high status that everything has to be evaluated in terms of?

JBP: Uh huh.

SH: And then philosophically we say: Where do "wants" come from? And of course there's a long anthropological and psychological set of literature here. What's the source of our "wants"? Are they based in biological drives? Are they instinctual? Are they acquired? Are they intellectual? Do they have any relationship to our rational capacities? When I'm acting, should I act on my desires and my wants, and so forth?

So there's *that* whole tradition, and we have to have a sophisticated theory about how all of that is going to work if we're going to say we'll solve all of these cognitive epistemological issues in terms of "wants" or the satisfaction of "desires" or the "achievement of goals" the way pragmatists want us to do.

And again, it's fairly easy to imagine what the skeptical argument is likely going to be. If it's a matter of what *I* want—well, isn't science supposed to be about coming up with *general* truths or maybe even *universal* truths?

JBP: Okay …

SH: And if it's immediately going to devolve into whatever *individuals* want, well then we're going to go in fairly scattered directions.

[34:00]

JBP: Okay, so that also opens up a good point for a segue into the potential link between Neo-Marxism, let's say, and Postmodernism.

SH: Sure.

JBP: Because maybe you could say: Once you've opened the door to an admission that you can criticize the idea of "want" as a social construct, let's say—which is one of the things that you intimated (not the only thing, obviously)—then you open the door to also making the claim that that social construct that governs the "wants," that governs the "truth," can be governed by "power relationships," something like that, and then by "unfair power relationships."

SH: Exactly.

JBP: So you can spin off down that aisle.

And that's the *other* thing I *really* want to talk to you about, because on the one hand the postmodernists are following this intellectual tradition of the critique of Western thinking, which is exactly in some sense what philosophy should be doing. But in another way, they seem simultaneously to be introducing, almost by sleight of hand, a kind of social critique that has its origin more in *political revolution* and *class-based theory*, and they do that under the guise of pure philosophy, in some sense, but with the intent and motivation of something like *justifying the social revolution*, or continuing the Marxist analysis of power differential.

[35:18]

SH: It can go both ways, yes. Right? It is possible to follow the road that we've just been going down, to say, Well, you know, if it's a matter about 'what works for *you*,' then that immediately starts to sound too relativistic and subjectivistic and we don't have an answer to all the weirdos who want to do strange things—because that's what they want to do—so we might introduce as a corrective a socializing of the process.

JBP: Right.

SH: So we might then say, No, it's not so much what *you* want as an individual, but rather what *we* want, and we have to achieve some sort of a consensus here.

So that's a slightly cartoon version, but the difference between William James, who was more individualistic, and John Dewey in the next generation who collectivized things a bit more. So then we have a corrective on all of the individual weirdos—who knows what their desires and goals are going to be?

JBP: Right.

SH: But anyway, of course we just confront the same problem there, as soon as we start doing anthropology [36:13], because then if we say: Well, if we relativize it to the social group, when we start looking at different social groups, obviously different social groups have dramatically different wants and needs and desires, and they've evolved very different traditions. And if it's a matter of saying "What's true is what works for the group," there is then no über group or highest group of all groups that has status over all of the others.

And if you do—and this is the second point that you said exactly right—then you're saying, Well, no, no, *this* group's norms and its goals are better than *that* group's goals or norms …

JBP: Right.

SH: … and so then you're into what the critics are going to call "imperialism" of the inappropriate form …

JBP: Right, and so that leaves us with our current political situation in some sense, because that idea has been taken to … that's a logical conclusion, and that logical conclusion has now been instantiated to a large degree as an intellectual and political activist movement, I would say.

[37:22]

SH: Right, sure, absolutely. So it can start as an intellectual movement and what we're trying to do is some hard-core epistemology [*epistemology: the theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity and scope: the investigation of what distinguishes justified belief from opinion*] and we go the Empiricists and the Rationalists and the Kantian revolution and the Pragmatists, right? And now we're in the second-generation Pragmatism where we relativize into various cognitive groups and then we're just stuck in a kind of group relativism, and in the operational principles socially then is going to be that each group so to speak should stick to itself and not think that it can impose its ideas and its norms on any other group, right? All groups, so to speak, are equal.

JBP: Yeah, well, at least they have an equal claim to their formulation of the truth. The problem with the postmodern conjunction with Neo-Marxism to me seems to be the acceptance of the idea that there's an intrinsic moral claim by the "dispossessed" to the obtaining of status, and that actually constitutes a higher moral calling in and of itself! So they're swallowing a moral claim in making it "universal" in some sense at the same time they *criticize* the idea of, say, "general narratives" or "universal moral claims."

SH: Okay, now that's also right. That's the other way to say that. Rather than starting with epistemology and getting to a kind of cultural relativism, you can start, of course, committed to a certain normative [*normative: implying, creating, or prescribing a norm or standard*] framework *or* a certain ideological framework (as Marxism is) where you're very critical of one of those traditions, and then the cultural relativism can be a part of that, that you use, to criticize the tradition "internally" so to speak. Now then we're explicitly into—not kind of "meta-ethics" and asking where do we get our ethical principles off the ground—but where do they come from in the first place, but kind of a robust "normative" ethics where people have commitments to fairly strong ethical principles and ethical ideals.

[39:26] This is where the debate between, say, Nietzsche and Marx becomes relevant. This is a late 19th century debate. So suppose we say, as both the Marxists do and the Nietzscheans do, let's say: There is no "Truth" in any objective sense. All we have is subjectivity and relativity of various sorts, and we have different individuals and different groups, and they are in antagonistic conflict relations with each other, and that means there's not really going to be any rational and civil resolution [40:04] of these discussions with each other; instead, it all

comes down to *power*.

JBP: Yeah, and that's the strange sleight of hand claim there too, because *why* it has to come down to power? Again that seems to introduce the idea of "necessary need" ….

SH: Okay, okay, yes, all right. That's another thing. Let's set that aside just for a moment.

JBP: Yep, okay.

SH: So *then* we say: Okay, so we have *power*. And one thing that we *can* say is: While we don't think any one individual, or any one group, has a better *objective* claim to truth or better ideals, it is nonetheless the case that some individuals and groups have more *power* than others, and so *then* we have to make our allegiance *clear* in this unequal power struggle: Are we on the side of those who have *more* power or are we on the side of those who have *less* power?

[41:00]

And that's where when we get then a Nietzschean and a Marxian "fork in the road." So the Nietzscheans, following Nietzsche, will say: *Look, it's all about power.* We can try on some crude evolutionary thinking here: It's only by the exercise of power by the stronger, the fitter, the healthier, and so forth, who are willing to impose their power on the weaker and use them for their own ends, that we as individuals and groups are going to make any sort of progress toward the next best thing, whatever that is. So in the power struggle there is no objective morality, no objective truth. We just throw our lot in with the stronger, with the richer, with the more powerful, and say: Whatever it is that *they* do to advance themselves, that's the normative best that we can do. And of course there's a long kind of aristocratic tradition in normative thinking that one can draw on to support that.

[41:58] And then the Marxists of course are just on the other side of that equation, where *their* sympathies initially are going to be to say, in any power struggle: "Our *a priori* commitments should always be to the weaker, to those on the losing end of history, those who suffer," and so forth, and it's always the bad, rich and powerful people who are oppressing and harming them. And so we throw our lot in with the weaker and we're willing to use power, whatever amount of power we have, on behalf of the weaker.

[42:35]

JBP: Right.

SH: And then we're just into what I think of as the major false alternative that really has driven much of 20th century intellectual life: Are you a Nietzschean or are you a Marxist?

JBP: Right, right. Well okay. So now we can get to the crux of the matter here to some degree, because to even engage in that argument means to accept the *a priori* position, which you've made quite rationally compelling, let's say, that "It's *power*. It's *power*. Because there's no other way of differentiating between the claims of different groups, it's *power* that's the determining issue."

SH: Yes.

JBP: But that's something that I really have a problem with. And I think it's of crucial importance. Because first of all I think there's a big difference between *power* and authority and competence. Those are all not the same thing, because you might be willing to cede greater status to me in some domains if there are things I can do, that you value, that you can't do. And that's not power exactly. Power seems to be more that I'm willing to use force to impose my interpretation of the world to get my wants fulfilled *on* you, and it seems to me that where the Marxists make a *huge* mistake—not that the Nietzscheans aren't making mistakes as well— but where the Marxists make a huge mistake is that they fail to properly differentiate between hierarchies of interpretation that are predicated on tyrannical power, and hierarchies of interpretation that are predicated on authority, competence, and mutual consent.

[44:03] The other issue that they fail to contend with—and I believe this is a form of *willful* blindness—is that it *isn't* obviously the case that "every society is set up equally to only fulfil the desires of the people who are, in principle, situated at the pinnacles of the hierarchies." I actually *don't* think that that's fundamentally characteristic of the Western tradition, because it has a very strong emphasis—weirdly enough, and this is how I think it "extracts" itself out of the conundrum which accepting a socialized version of truth presents to you: The West does two things: (1) It says, We have a social contract that constrains our views of the world and our actions in it, but (2) that contract is also simultaneously subordinate to the idea of the sovereignty of each individual. And so the social contract then is *bound* to *serve* the needs of each individual—not any privileged set of individuals, although sometimes it works out that way—and I *don't* believe that the postmodernists have contended with that properly, with their criticism of "logocentrism" for example, which was something that characterized Derrida.

'Cause I think that that … 'cause I … It doesn't … it never *has* seemed to me that what you had with Stalinist Russia and the Marxist view of the world, and what you had on the side of the West, was merely a matter of a difference of opinion between two equally valid socialized modes of interpreting the world, you know? There's something *wrong* about … There's something *more* to the view of the West than what's embodied in the conflict between, say, capitalism and socialism. Because it could have just been a matter of argumentation and opinion, but I think that that's faulty.

[45:52] I thought this way in part because of Piaget [Jean Piaget, 1896-1980], you know, because Piaget was interested in what the *intrinsic* constraints were on a social contract, and he said … and he was trying to address this issue of the insufficiency of *want* as a tool to justify your claims to truth. That's when he introduced the idea of the *equilibrated state*. So, if you're sophisticated, you have to put forward your want and then meet it in a way that will meet it today, and tomorrow, and next month, and next year, and in a decade—so you have to iterate yourself across time, and you have to take all of the iterations of yourself across time with some degree of seriousness, and then you also have to do the same thing as you extend yourself out into the social community. So it has to be "what's good for me now" and repetitively into the future in a manner that's simultaneously good for *you* now and simultaneously into the future.

SH: Uh huh.

JBP: And that starts to become … and he thought about that as "the playable game," something like that. The "voluntarily playable game." And there's something *deep* about that, because it includes the idea of iteration, you know, iterated interpretations into the equation, which strikes me as of crucial importance.

[47:11]

SH: Okay, yes, right? Again, I count about six very interesting sub-topics built into that, and the latter part is a very nice statement I think of a kind of Enlightenment humanism where we're going to take *power* seriously, but we're going to *constrain* power in a way that respects the individual and simultaneously enables individuals to form mutually beneficial social networks across time, and so on.

And I'm very sympathetic to that overall construction. And that comes out of then the *fir*st part which is a taxonomy [*taxonomy: the science or technique of classification*] you're offering about the nature of power—and that taxonomy does differ significantly from both the Marxist and the Nietzschean ones.

Now what I'd say is that I think it's better to take *power* more *neutrally* so there's a continuity with what the physicists do. And my understanding there is that power is just the ability to get work done.

JBP: Uh hmm.

SH: So you can put that in *tool* and *functionality* language: Power is what gets you from A to B.

JBP: Right, right. Which is also … I love that description, because it fits very nicely in with the narrative conceptualization of being, because narratives seem to be descriptions of something like "How to get from point A to point B."

[48:42]

SH: Right. But it also doesn't say anything about B and the status of B: How we choose where we should be going, what our ends are, or what our goals are—so in that sense power is normatively neutral—it's a means to an end, and that means when we try to *evaluate* the uses of power, we're going to be evaluating power in terms of the ends toward which it is put, if I can end with that preposition there.

So now … Then we say: Okay, well, power comes in all kinds of forms. I'm quite happy to say that there's *intellectual* power: that's the ability to use our minds to address and solve certain problems. There's *muscular* power: the ability to move physical objects. There's *social* power: people respect you and are willing to spend time with you and divert resources to you voluntarily, and so forth. There's *military* power; *political* power—and so we can have a whole set of subspecies of power. And what they all have then in common is in each of those domains there are goals, and having the power enables you to achieve your goals in those domains.

[49:57]

JBP: Right, and we shouldn't fall prey to the illusion that there's necessarily any—like, what would you call it—"unifying matrix" that makes all those different forms of power importantly similar *except for the terminology*, you know? I mean—and this is another thing that bothers me about both the Nietzschean and the Marxist view, is that there's this proclivity to *collapse* these multiple modes of power into power it*self*, and that's not reasonable because it's reasonable to note that many of the forms of power that you just described contend *against* one another, rather than mutually *fortify* one another. It's like the balance of power in a polity like the American polity.

SH: Yes, I think that's a deep point that you're making, and I think that both the Marxists and the Nietzscheans do end up collapsing power into a unitary type, and that's a mistake. But it's a mistake only if you *deny*, as both the Marxists and the Nietzscheans do, that there is a deep *individuality* about the world. So if you think, by contrast, about the kind of individual human-rights-respecting Enlightenment vision that you're articulating, and that I agree with as well: *normatively* that wants to devolve social power to the individual, and leave individuals with a great deal of self-responsibility and control over their own domain so to speak. And the idea then is that if we're going to form social relationships, or any sort of social interaction, it has to be mutually respecting: that I have to respect your control over *your* domain and you respect my control over *my* domain, but we agree to share domains, so to speak, voluntarily to a certain point.

JBP: It also means—and this is a place where I think the postmodernists are really open to, you might say, conceptual assault—is that you know, in order to have that freedom devolve upon the individual in that manner, it also means that the individual has to take responsibility …

SH: Right.

JBP: … for acting as a locus of power in the world, *actual* responsibility, and cannot conceive of themselves or act in a manner that only makes them an avatar of a social movement. And I think that part of the perfervid anti-individualism of the radical Left is precisely predicated on that refusal to take responsibility, and I think that's also reflected in the fact that, by temperament, they're low in "trait conscientiousness," so it's *deep,* it's not merely an opinion; it's an expression of something that's even deeper than opinion.

SH: Okay, yes, that phrase "locus of responsibility," "locus of power," "locus of control"— you're right that the far Left in Marxist and Neo-Marxist form does deny that, but you also find that in the far Right …

JBP: Yes, you find that among ideologues in general.

SH: Right. So this is a bit of cartoon intellectual history, but then if you try to trace it to the Marxists on the Left and the Nietzscheans on the Right, both of them do deny that individuals are loci of responsibility. Both of them in their views of human nature have strongly deterministic views. What we can an "individual," according to both of them, is just a "vehicle" through which "outside forces are flowing," so to speak. [*Determinism: the doctrine that all events, including human action, are ultimately determined by causes external to the will. Some philosophers*

have taken determinism to imply that human beings have no free will and cannot be held morally responsible for their actions.]

JBP: Right. Well, you can also see that in some sense as a perverse consequence of the scientific revolution …

SH: Yes.

JBP: …because you still see this among modern scientists: It's like, "Okay, what are the causal forces that regulate human behavior? Okay, there's two primary sources: Nature/biology and culture."

SH: So it's the crude "Nature vs. Nurture" debate being played out through them, yes.

JBP: Right! And so in my opinion—and I've derived this conclusion from studying mythology, mostly—there's a missing third element there which is whatever it is that constitutes the active force of individual consciousness. And we don't have a good conceptual schema for that.

SH: Right, self-responsibility and being an independent *initiator* of power instead of merely a responder to *other* power forces, or a vehicle through which those other power forces operate.

[54:21]

JBP: Right.

SH: So yes, the individualism that is built into Enlightenment humanism—you start to see it developing in Renaissance humanism—is to take seriously the notion that individuals have some significant measure of control over their thoughts, over their actions, to shape their own character …

JBP: Right!

SH: … to shape their own destinies, and that that is fundamental to one's moral dignity as a human being. And so that view of human nature is built into the ethics fundamentally, and then all of social relationships have to be respectful of that individuality, and then, consequently, when we start to turn to political theory and we talk about very heavy-*duty* uses of power, such as the police and the military—we want to have serious constraints on government power to make sure that we are respecting individual sovereignty.

JBP: [55:19] Okay. And here's something perverse, too, that emerges as a consequence of something you pointed out earlier in the conversation, you know. You mentioned that when Modernism emerged out of Medievalism, that two things happened. One was the elaboration of the conceptual frames that enabled us to deal with the external world. But the other was the elevation of the individual to the status of valid *critic*, predicated on the idea that there was something actually valid about individual experience as *such*.

Now the *problem* there, as far as I can tell—and maybe this is part of the reason we're in this

conundrum—is that the elaboration of the objective scientific viewpoint left us with the idea that it was either "nature" or "nurture" that was the source of human motive power.

But the missing element there is: Well, if *that's* the case, then why grant to the individual to *begin* with the role of independent social critic?

SH: Exactly.

JBP: [56:14] Like, on what grounds do you … It's like a residual belief in something like the autonomy of the soul, which you can't just sneak in and not *justify*, without *problems*! Like the ones that we have now!

SH: Yes. Now that's well put. And I think it's fair to say that we still are in the infancy of the psychological sciences—you can speak to this better than I can—but as someone in philosophy, I think we're still at the beginnings. And we are still in the grip of early and crude versions of scientific understandings of how cause and effect operates. So what we are starting with is very mechanical understandings, and we can understand how people then are pushed around by biological forces. We can understand to some extent how they're pushed around by external physical and mechanical forces. But we do not yet have a sophisticated enough understanding of the human brain, the human mind, human psychology, to understand how a volitional consciousness can be a causal force, a causal power in the world.

JBP: [57:19] Right. That's perfectly well put. So, I do a detailed analysis that some of the people who watch me are familiar with, of this movie "Pinocchio," and Pinocchio has got a very classical mythological structure, and it basically introduces three elements of being: so there's (1) the element of being that's associated with Geppetto; and also (2) the evil tyrannical forces that are kind of patriarchal in nature, and that's sort of the "conceptualization of society"—a benevolent element and a malevolent element, say. And then there's (3) the introduction of this other causal factor and it's personified in the form of the Blue Fairy. The Blue Fairy is a manifestation of Mother Nature, and she animates Pinocchio.

So Geppetto creates him, and then sets up a wish for his independence, and then Nature appears in the guise of the Blue Fairy and grants that wish. So you have "culture" and "nature" conspiring to produce a puppet that could in fact disentangle itself from its strings. But the movie insists—and it does this on profound mythological grounds—that the puppet *itself* has a causal role to play in its own … what would you call it … in its own capacity to transcend the deterministic chains, the deterministic processes which have given rise to it, that also enslave it.

SH: Um hmm.

[58:36]

JBP: You know in all of our profound narratives, I would say—and this is part of the way that they differ from the scientific account—there's always that third element. There's always the autonomous individual who is, in some sense, you know, lifting himself up by his own bootstraps.

SH: Yes…

JBP: And I don't think it's a problem that science is unable to account for, but it's a *very* big problem when scientists who *are* unable to account for that *deny that it exists,* because they can't explain it. That becomes extraordinarily dangerous.

SH: Right. Yes. Once you stop looking, you stop trying, right? Then you're left with an impoverished account. So in a way, there's a kind of hubris built into the skepticism that says, "I know that this is a problem that we just can't solve, so I'm not going to try anymore."

JBP: Yeah, well there's a *performative* contradiction as well, which is much worth pointing out—because on the one hand, the scientist might well claim, "As far as I'm concerned, from an epistemological perspective, the only two causal forces are 'nature' and 'culture.' But then I'll go about my actions in the normative world, as an existential being, acting in the world, and I will swallow whole-heartedly the proposition that 'each individual is responsible for his own actions'—because that's how I constantly interact with everyone in the world. And I get very irritated if they violate that principle."

[1:00:15]

SH: Yes, right. So how you *live* with your skepticism or your relativism in a way that doesn't ensnarl you in tensions and contradictions—that's a hard project itself.

JBP: Well, it does seem to me, I think it's reasonable to point out that it's not possible to find a person who acts as if he or anyone else is "biologically or culturally determined." We just don't behave that way in the real world. We act as if we're responsible for our own actions, and the consequences of those actions.

SH: Right. So then we have a tension between what our "intellectual theories" are telling us, and what our kind of "empirical data" is telling us—we don't have a way to put those two together, and then what you as an individual do in response to that tension between theory and practice—that's a whole other can of things to explore.

JBP: Right.

SH: But to back up to our discussion about power— It's interesting that the way our discussion, up to that point, then integrates three things: (1) We started talking about truth, and then (2) we started talking about goals and normative ends and ideals, and then (3) we talk about power.

So there we've got already the big three: Truth, Ideals, and Power.

Our discussion about Truth took us into epistemological issues in philosophy; our discussion about Ideals takes us into ethics and meta-ethics issues and also into philosophy; and our discussion of Power takes us into issues about human nature, all of which traditionally comprise a branch of philosophy and its sub-disciplines.

[1:01:50]

So we already have to have a theory of epistemology [*epistemology: the theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity and scope: the investigation of what distinguishes justified belief from opinion*]; a theory of human nature; a theory of ethics—and we can sometimes try to integrate those—and postmodernism is going to be an integration of certain views that develop in philosophical traditions in all three of those areas.

So maybe one way to put it is this: If you contrast it to kind of a—again, taking the Enlightenment as our touchstone—I think we're both fans of the Enlightenment—we say: All right, we're fine with *power*. Knowledge is *power*, and we want to *empower* the individual. We want to eliminate slavery and empower people. We want to eliminate old-fashioned sexism and empower women. So power is…

[1:02:43]

JBP: Yes, we actually want to remove arbitrary and unnecessary impediments to the expression of proper power.

SH: That's right. So there are illegitimate uses of power that are stopping and disempowering people. So it's the double-edged sword. And as long as power is properly directed or properly located, then we are confident that, by and large, people individually and socially will use their power to put together useful lives, build successful economies and societies, and so forth.

So it's actually a very optimistic overall assessment about power. But power is then structured as a means to an end: we want to empower people *cognitively*—teach them how to read, teach them how to think, so that they themselves can understand the truth and discover new truths. So "power leads to truth."

But we also then want people to be free to *act* on the basis of their power, because then we think that if people are respected as individual agents, they're going to be happier and so they will achieve good goals, and they will mutually work out together fair agreements and deals— a kind of "justice," right? Society will get better and better, and so forth.

So *power* is in the service of *just* social relations, and *power* is in the service of *truth*.

JBP: Yes, so now that's a great "justification," say, for the Enlightenment viewpoint, and it seems—I don't want to stop you from pursuing that—but it also seems to me that, to the degree that that's *true* (a valid description of the Enlightenment aims), and to the degree that that has actually manifested itself in reality in the current state of human affairs, that it's perhaps *unwise* of us to allow our Marxist or our Nietzschean presuppositions to take too careless a swing at that foundation, given that it's actually …

SH: Absolutely right, and that's why the Enlightenment articulation "Power is good if it's in the service of truth"— or "Power is good if it's in the service of justice"—then we're fine. And we're optimistic enough about human beings, cognitively and morally, that we think that "empowering" them— giving them lots of freedoms— is going to increase the net stock of truth, and it's going to increase the net stock of justice. So that entire "Enlightenment package" is precisely what the Counter-Enlightenment attacks. It attacked very fundamentally

so that by the time we get two to three generations later— to the generations of Marx and Nietzsche— it has been hollowed out.

[1:05:45] So on the epistemological side we don't believe that there is such a thing as "truth" anymore. So it's not the case that "power" is in the search of "truth," because we don't believe that human beings are capable of getting to any sort of objective truth anymore. So we're just left with "power."

And also on the normative side, we don't believe in "justice" anymore. We don't believe that any sort of normative principles or ethical ideals can be objectively grounded. And so then, once again, maybe we're left with subjective desires and so forth, but we're just left again with "power."

So power in the service of Truth; power in the service of Justice: that goes away. All that we are left with is Power.

JBP: Okay, so then we could mount a psycho-analytic critique of that set of objections. Because I could say, Okay, here's some reasons. Let's assume you're doing something simple and easy instead of complicated and difficult with your objections. And so here's the simple and easy explanation:

You want to dispense with the idea of "justice" and "truth" because that lightens your existential load because now there's nothing difficult and noble that you have to strive for, and you want to reduce everything to "power" because that justifies *your* use of power in your pursuit of those immediate goals that you no longer even *have* to justify because you don't have to make reference to any higher standards of, say, "justice" or "truth." And so I would say: That's a deep, impulsive and resentful nihilism that's manifesting itself as a glorious intellectual critique. [*Nihilism: a viewpoint that traditional values and beliefs are unfounded and that existence is senseless and useless.*]

Now, I understand as well that there is the history of genuine intellectual critique that you've been laying out, which is not trivial— but those things have to be differentiated, you know. It's certainly not reasonable either for those who claim that "all there is is power," that they're not themselves motivated equally by that power.

[1:07:55]

SH: Sure. So in one way, all right, what you can always say, in effect, is that philosophy is autobiographical. In many cases philosophers will put their pronouncements in third-person form, or in generalized form, but if you always put it down to third-person formulations, it can be profoundly self-revelatory.

So if you say, for example, "Human beings are scum"—there you have some sort of a pessimistic assessment of the human condition. Well, built into that then is the idea that *I*, if I "first-personalize it," that "I am scum." What you're really doing is a first-person confession. And it's always then an illegitimate move to exempt yourself from the general principle.

JBP: Right.

SH: Or: "Everything just is "power relations" and "people imposing their agendas on other people." Then what you're saying is: "Well, my fundamental commitment is power, and I just want to impose my agenda on other people."

So I do think you're right— that it can go both ways: It can of course be that you have people who, for whatever reason, have a predisposition to nihilistic, amoral power seeking, and when they become adults and "intellectual," they latch onto theories that indulge them, that enable them to rationalize their predispositions.

And so in many cases, yes, a lot of Postmodernism, in some of its manifestations, is disingenuous in that form. People don't necessarily buy into the postmodern philosophical framework, but rather, in kind of pragmatic form, Postmodernism as a set of "tools" is useful for them to advance their own personal and social agendas, whatever those happen to be.

[1:09:49]

JBP: Okay. So let's switch a little bit. Let's switch over into that a little bit. I've found our discussion extremely useful on the philosophical end, but now I would like to make it a bit more personal, if you don't mind.

You're written this book *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault.* And it's a fairly "punchy," let's say, critique of Postmodernism and its alliance with Neo-Marxism. And you've done a careful job of laying out the historical development of both of those movements and their alliance.

(1) What was your motivation for doing that; and what have you experienced as a consequence (1) of writing the book, and (2) as a consequence of being a professor who's in the midst of an academic society that's basically running on postmodern principles?

SH: [1:10:41] [laughs] Yes, that's a good trio of questions there. Well, my motivations for writing the book were: One, as an intellectual exercise: here was a movement that was complex, many philosophical and cultural strands coming together, and I enjoy intellectual history very much—so it was a pleasure for me to read back into the histories and to tease out all of the lines of developments, and how things were packaged and repackaged—so that the postmodern synthesis (as it came together in the second third of the 20th century) came into being. As a purely intellectual historical enterprise, I found that fulfilling.

Partly also this was the 1990s, late 1990s, it's end of the Cold War. One of the things I had done—not professionally, but just out of personal interest—was read a lot of political philosophy, read a lot about the Cold War and the intellectual developments—and call it political developments—that had gone on there. So I had a very good, I'd say, amateur working knowledge, before I started researching the book, about the history of Marxism and the history of Cold War geo-politics.

And sort of one of the big questions on everyone's mind of course in the late 1990s with the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War is: What's going to happen next? So what's the new geo-political alignment going to be?

Then from my academic position, the big question inside the intellectual word is: Since far-left politics had been so prominent and that for generations, intellectuals inside the academic world had largely given the benefit of the doubt to far-leftist experiments—even going out of their way to be fellow travelers, and so forth—that by the time you get to the end of the Cold War, basically everybody, except for a few true believers, is rethinking.

So what does this mean for—not necessarily left politics more broadly, but certainly for far-left politics? And so even the far-leftists of the leftists are recognizing that they're going to have to come up with some sort of a new strategy in order to remain intellectually respectable, and some sort of a new strategy in order to become culturally and politically feasible.

[1:13:24] So I did have a kind of a cultural/political interest in what the thinking was on the far left about what they're going to do now that the Soviet Union has collapsed and the whole world is shifting more toward a market liberalism or to some sort of "third way" centrism.

JBP: Yeah, and now that all the corpses have floated up on the beach, so to speak …

SH: Right. Yes! So you have a huge then amount of empirical data that you have to confront and…Now, I think this is going to be part of the postmodern package, but there's a lot of denial of the relevance of empiricism; there's a lot of denial of the relevance of logic and social-scientific statistical methods of aggregating that data and reaching normative conclusions on the basis of that. So we can understand the temptation on the part of a lot of people to find psychological devices that will enable them to deny the Gulag and the various other horrible things. By the time the 90s …

JBP: Right. When the facts, as even you [of the left] would have construed them, are stacking up viciously in contradiction to your theory, it's time to mount an all-out assault on what constitutes a "fact."

SH: Okay, that's one strategy, and that's again one of the sub-strategies I think that postmoderns will use. So, if you then have philosophers and social scientists, and people who are up to speed in their epistemology, who are telling you, Well, you know, there are just different narratives that are out there, and there are no such things as objective facts, and logic does not necessarily point us in one direction: there are "poly-logics" or "multiple frameworks"—then if you have one "framework" that says, "No. There *are* objective facts and the logic is all going against your version of political idealism," then it's going to be very tempting for you to say, "Well, I can just dismiss that as just one narrative way of constructing the historical facts: *I* can come up with a different narrative that softens or denies altogether …"

And certainly some of the bad-faith postmodernists do go down that road very much.

So in part that was my motivation for writing the book.

And in part I did feel that I was in a good position intellectually to do so because my Ph.D. work had been in logic, philosophy of science and epistemology, so I was up to speed on the entire history of epistemology from the modern world on through the way things were in the

23

80s and the early 1990s. So I was reading the same people that Rorty had. I have to say I learned an enormous amount from reading Richard Rorty. He's first rate, even though I end up disagreeing fundamentally with him about everything … Foucault's Ph.D. also was in philosophy; he also had a Ph.D. in psychology. Derrida—another philosophy Ph.D. Lyotard—another philosophy Ph.D. So, not necessarily putting myself on the same stature intellectually, but all of us, so to speak, are first-rate educated in epistemology. So I know where they're coming from and where all of that is going.

[1:16:52] At the same time, my undergraduate and master's degree at Guelph (just down the road from you) in history of philosophy—so I had a long-standing passion for how arguments and movements develop over time, so I thought I was in a good position to see how postmodernism had evolved out of various other earlier movements that had developed over time—and I am enough of a political animal to be interested in political philosophy. And I believe that abstract philosophical theory, when it gets put into practice, makes life-and-death practical differences …

So the stakes are high. So I was motivated then to put it all together: How does the history and the philosophy and the politics all come together in Postmodernism? So I wrote the book.

Now, yes. How it has affected me personally in academic life. Well, let me see. In one way I think I was fortunate that I had tenure by the time the book was published, and my university is by and large a tolerant place. We have some issues here, but by and large my colleagues are reasonable, decent people, and at least I was able to get tenure on the strength of my teaching abilities and my publication. And so it wasn't that I was going to lose my job over this.

[1:18:29]

But of course there is blowback. I did have difficulty getting the book published in the first place. Actually I finished writing the book by the year 2000. I had taken a sabbatical from 1999-2000 and wrote the book then, but I was not able to get the book published until 2004, and the reason for that was a number of "desk rejections"—you know, the editor just sends a form letter back. I got a few of those. But, more seriously, what happened three times, possibly four times, I don't remember exactly now, was it would get past the editor at the press, and then it would be sent out to two or three reviewers—and in each case what happened was I would get split and polarized-split reviews. One would come back and say, "This is a really good book; he's done his homework, it's a good argument, it's a fresh argument … I don't necessarily agree with all of it, but this really ought to be out there as a book"; and then the other review on the other side would be equally savaging: "This is a terrible book; he doesn't know his history of philosophy, he's butchered this that and the other thing, and I strongly recommend that you don't publish this book." And then almost always in that situation, the editor just says, "No."

So it wasn't until late 2003, early 2004, that Scholargy Publishing, which was then a small press working out of Arizona, took the book on, and I'm happy to say that after it was published, it's been in print consistently since then.

JBP: Yes, that's remarkable. That's remarkable.

SH: Yes, so I'm very happy about that …

JBP: For any book, let alone an academic book.

SH: Yes, and then multiple translations, and those continue, so I'm happy about that.

Now I'd say the scholarly responses have been from moderate liberals—kind of traditional … I don't necessarily want to use the word "traditional"—but from rational, naturalistic, liberal thinkers, conservatives and libertarians: the reviews have all been strong, and strongly positive.

But I have not received any formal reviews from any of the postmodern or far-left journals, so I'm not sure what that means, but there is, at least at some level, an unwillingness to engage …

JBP: Well, it might be a sign of respect.

SH: [1:20:56] Well there is one sign of respect that comes out, and that is that every… I'd say once a year or so … probably a dozen times since the book has been published, I've been asked by the editor of a postmodern or close fellow-traveler, critical-theory-type of journal, to be a second reviewer on one of their articles. So I'm "in their Rolodex," so to speak—to use the old-fashioned label—when they are actually looking for someone who is likely to give an objective but critical perspective on some article that's been submitted to the journal—once in a while my name floats up and they'll send it out to me, so I'll just do the standard thing of reading it and giving my professional opinion of it.

So I think they are aware of me, but there hasn't really been any direct intellectual engagement, which is kind of sad.

JBP: [1:21:45] Right. Yes. So now when you set yourself up to write the book, were you thinking of writing a *critique* of postmodernism, or were you thinking of conducting an *exploration* of postmodernism?

SH: Well, right now I'm working on the critique. The first book ends—I don't want to say abruptly—but it does end with the door open to saying: How then do we respond to this dead end of Counter-Enlightenment thought in postmodernism? So we're at a point culturally where the meaning of postmodernism has now infected the academy and you see problems there, but it's also *left* the academy, and so thoughtful people outside the academy are seeing the results. And so the big question is: What do we do next?

So I am actively working on the sequel to *Explaining Postmodernism* now. And I did go back and forth in the writing of it. My first purpose was to write a straight diagnosis and intellectual history of postmodernism, and that's where I ended up leaving it, because in one sense this was a bit artificial, but I really like 200-page books. It's long enough for you to get into a subject deeply enough and to make a good, pointed, integrated argument and then stop.

And so I realized if I wrote the sequel *then*, it would be a 400-page book, and I thought it was more important to get this self-contained intellectual history of postmodernism out there. So I brought things to I think a logical conclusion where I ended the book, and now I'm working on the next.

JBP: What's the next one called?

SH: The working title … it changes every few months or so—sometimes I think about, *The Fate of the Enlightenment* or something to do with *Neo-Enlightenment* or—it won't be this—but *Post-Postmodernism* or *After Postmodernism*—something like that.

JBP: Okay. We've been struggling with terminology as well with the people I'm been talking with about such things.

SH: It's a very hard thing to do, because as we've seen philosophically, Postmodernism is multi-dimensional: it's a metaphysical critique, it's a normative critique, it's a political critique, it's an epistemological set of views. And so the alternative then also has to be integrated philosophically. There has to be an entire philosophical package—so what label is going to capture all of that and at the same time make a connection to postmodernism—and also, I'm basically an optimistic positive guy, so I want something that has a positive …

JBP: Yes, illuminates the pathway forward.

SH: Yes, that's right, yes. Making the world a better place

JBP: Right. Exactly, exactly. So look—I think an hour-and-a-half interview is approximately the equivalent of a 200-page book.

SH: [laughs] So we're done.

JBP: Why don't we end with that, and what I would like to propose is that we have another discussion in a couple of months about what you're thinking about with regards to what you're writing *now*.

So, like, we've covered the intellectual territory; we've covered the historical territory; and done a reasonably good job I think of both "justifying" postmodernism in this discussion, and also pointing out its pitfalls and dangers.

SH: Sure, yes.

JBP: We haven't outlined much for an alternative vision except making tangential reference to the potency of individual capacity, but that would seem to be reasonable grounds for the next discussion. So …

SH: [1:25:43] What else would be worth, next time we chat, talking about are the current culture war issues. You know, one of the things I'm very interested in is younger people in particular who are in the front lines in universities, so to speak, and they're surrounded and bewildered and angry, and in some cases, intimidated by all of this "micro-aggressions" and so forth, and in some cases the indoctrination they're getting …

JBP: But I'm actually kind of glad that we didn't talk about the more political end of it today, because it enabled us to have a conversation that was almost entirely philosophical in nature, and I really think that's the right level of analysis, because the battle that's occurring in our

culture is actually occurring at a philosophical level. I mean, there's other levels as well, but that's even more important than the political level as far as I'm concerned.

SH: Well said. I agree one-hundred percent. Nicely put.

JBP: All right. Well, it was a pleasure speaking with you—it was very much worthwhile.

SH: For me too, thanks much.

JBP: You have a remarkable capacity for tracking the content of conversations and keeping them on point, so that's quite amazing to see, because we did branch out in a lot of different directions, more or less simultaneously, and it was quite helpful in keeping the conversation on track that you could so rapidly organize the … You know, it was almost like you were putting a paragraph structure in the conversation as it occurred, so that was something that was really interesting to see.

So, anyways, it was a pleasure meeting you, and thanks very much for talking with me. I'll obviously put a link … I've been recommending your book like …

SH: My pleasure. Much respect for the work you're doing. Thanks for having me on your show, and will be happy to talk again.

JBP: Great. Good. We'll set that up.

SH: All right. Thanks Jordan. Bye.

JBP: See you. Yep. Bye bye.

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