

Donald Trump Is The First President To Turn Postmodernism Against Itself

No one should be surprised that postmodern America chose an antihero to be our next president.

By [David Ernst](#)

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If politics flows downwards from culture, then it was only a matter of time before a politician mastered the role. Love him or hate him, Donald Trump cracked that code.

Tony Soprano, Walter White, and Frank Underwood are just a few recent examples of the enormously popular characters who have, each in their own way, stood in for the role of the complicated bad guy who fascinates millions of Americans.

Antiheroes have long found homes in Westerns, gangster movies, and crime dramas, such as Al Pacino's portrayal of Miami drug kingpin Tony Montana in "Scarface." Tony begins an epic decline and fall in the film with a nasty fight with his wife at an exclusive Miami country club. She publically humiliates him in front of a bunch of dumbstruck, WASPy, black-tie wearing, golf-playing white hairs by loudly accusing him of being a murderer, a drug dealer, and incapable of being a decent father.

If Tony were a classic hero, this would have been the beginning of his moral reckoning and his search for repentance. But this is "Scarface," and Tony is no hero, so he responds to his public exposure as a criminal in polite society by turning the mirror back on his audience and [dressing them down](#):

What you lookin' at? You all a bunch of f—in' a—holes. You know why? You don't have the guts to be what you wanna be. You need people like me. You need people like me so you can point your f—in' fingers and say, "That's the bad guy." So... what that make you? Good? You're not good. You just know how to hide, how to lie. Me, I don't have that problem. Me, I always tell the truth. Even when I lie. So say good night to the bad guy! Come on. The last time you gonna see a bad guy like this again, let me tell you.

A criminal's longing to be accepted by rich people who aren't criminals themselves isn't a new theme. Nevertheless, considering that Oliver Stone wrote the screenplay, Tony's rant is likely commentary about the hypocrisy of supposedly "respectable" people in cutthroat, capitalistic, Reagan-era America who are substantively no different than Tony is. All these well-to-do Miami types wouldn't be caught dead associating with someone like Tony, even though they know full well that the cocaine business is making them all rich, and many of them probably abuse his product.

Thus, from Tony's perspective, what's the point of being decent when the people who supposedly model "decency" have none of it themselves? Wouldn't a sign of moral contrition to these people be a perverted mockery of moral contrition? Wouldn't it be degrading even for Tony?

Tony isn't a hero or a villain: he's an antihero. You probably won't admit to rooting for him, but if you enjoyed watching him stick it to those (presumably) stuck-up hypocrites, then it's likely that you did. He's everything his wife said he was, sure, but at least he has the balls to be honest about it.

Donald Trump, the Political Antihero

Trump replicated this scene in [his inaugural address Friday](#), a "[declaration of war](#)" against "the establishment" whose "victories have not been your victories. Their triumphs have not been your

triumphs. And while they celebrated in our nation's capital, there was little to celebrate for struggling families all across our land.”

He acted similarly in a [jaw-dropping performance](#) at the Al Smith Dinner just days before his election. With every hiss-inducing joke at Hillary Clinton's expense was an unsubtle middle finger to everyone else in attendance. Consider his opening remarks:

And a special hello to all of you in this room who have known and loved me for many, many years. It's true. The politicians. They've had me to their homes. They've introduced me to their children. I've become their best friends in many instances. They've asked for my endorsement and they've always wanted my money. And even called me really a dear, dear friend. But then suddenly, decided when I ran for president as a Republican, that I've always been a no-good, rotten, disgusting scoundrel. And they totally forgot about me.

In other words: even if I have been a no-good, rotten, disgusting scoundrel, what does that make you? At least I don't pretend to be decent; you people, on the other hand, have the gall to pretend that you're any better than I am. Let's dispense with the fiction that you would have treated me with any less contempt if I had bothered to live up to any of your standards of decency in the first place, and acknowledge that they have nothing to do with decency per se, and everything to do with power. Your presumption of any moral superiority is a willful, bald-faced lie, and I'm going to keep calling you on that crap until it puts me in the White House.

Many have argued that Trump is the product of political correctness (PC). This is true only in part. Rather, both PC and Trump's response to it are fruits of the postmodernism that has long ascended to the heights of our culture: the nihilism in the common presumption that all truth is relative, morality is subjective, and therefore all of our individually preferred “narratives” that give our lives meaning are equally true and worthy of validation. Tony tellingly lectures his audience, “I always tell the truth, even when I lie.” His character was a man ahead of his time.

Postmodernism: Trying to Do Good Is a Waste of Time

Postmodernism is the source of the emphasis that our culture puts on authenticity, and the scorn it directs towards phoniness. After all, if the only one true thing in the world is that all truth and morality are relative, then anyone who pretends otherwise is either an idiot or a fraud. Hence the contemporary appeal of the antihero, and the disappearance of the traditional hero.

Heroes who stand for traditionally good things in a world where everything supposedly “good” has long been discredited are corny Dudley Do-Rights who are at best too stupid to know better. Antiheroes, by contrast, ingratiate themselves with their audiences for their gritty realism and their candor, no matter how bad they are. Frank Underwood breaks the fourth wall with his viewers and brings them along for his evil schemes; Walter White's moment of redemption is his final admission to his wife that he sells meth because he likes to, and not to do right by his family; and Tony Soprano establishes a close bond with his daughter early on when he admits to her that he's not actually a “waste management consultant.” In the postmodern world, there is no greater virtue than authenticity, and there is no greater vice than phoniness.

Postmodernism is also the source of the assumptions underlying the glib jokes of late-night comedians who exhibit disdainful prejudice towards patriotism or religion, but show bitter judgment towards any form of perceived prejudice. It is the baseline for just about every plotline in funny shows about

aimless, self-centered people like “Seinfeld,” “It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia,” and “Archer.” It is hyper-prejudice against prejudice, or in the words of Evan Sayet, “a cult of non-discrimination.”

In contrast to the many religions, systems of moral thought, and other ancient traditions that have distinguished every effort to better the human condition, postmodernism presumes that all of these endeavors are the cause of human failure. It therefore operates according to just one moral imperative: discredit anything that other people presume to stand for goodness, because the belief that anything is superior to anything else inevitably results in prejudice, interpersonal strife, and inequality.

Thus, the Venus de Milo has no more aesthetic value than a crucifix in a jar full of urine; Beethoven’s symphonies are no more profound than the latest round of top 40 hits; all religions are fundamentally the same, and their “moderate” postmodern adherents are all comfortably represented on the “Coexist” bumper sticker. In a sense, it isn’t culture at all, but rather an anti-culture that measures success insofar as it deconstructs anything that other people value.

Postmodernism Merely Hides Its Hypocritical Idealism

Provided that the postmodern man believes in nothing and values nothing, one wouldn’t be unreasonable in concluding that he cares about nothing. But anyone who knows postmodern man also knows that nothing could be farther from the truth. Rather, the “cult of non-discrimination” is filled with bright-eyed idealism about making the world a better place, and in the cases where it challenges baseless prejudice, it *does* make the world a better place. Like other utopian visions that seek to remake human beings into something alien to their nature, however, it is incapable of compromise, and thus lends itself to hypocrisy and fanaticism.

This hypocrisy is evident in the selective application of PC outrage. The disingenuousness of much “offense” taken is perhaps best exemplified by MSNBC, a self-appointed watchman against prejudice of all kinds in American life, [repeatedly failing](#) to live up to the very standards that it sets for others.

The striking contrast of Melissa Harris Perry and other commentators [mocking Mitt Romney’s](#) family for adopting a black baby, then [tearfully apologizing for it](#) shortly thereafter, smacks of a person who isn’t so much contrite as she is ashamed: she and her colleagues weren’t really thinking when they made fun of the Romneys, *and let their true sentiments show*. How else could someone who unmask the implicit racism in something so trivial as [Darth Vader’s character](#) make a mistake like that? It shows that all the righteous fury that these folks direct at *other* people for doing things just like this is an affectation: a contrived performance put on for other purposes.

PC’s selectivity was on vivid display during one of the first protests that swept American colleges in late 2015. During a public demonstration at Claremont McKenna College in response to a private email from the school’s dean that allegedly implied non-white students don’t [fit the school’s mold](#), students gathered to publicly discuss their own experiences dealing with racial prejudice in America. When a [Chinese student took the bullhorn](#) to talk about her own experience with discrimination at the hands of a group of black men, however, the protesters cringed and ushered her away.

When she attempted to clarify her point, one protester turned the bullhorn on her: “you’re getting derailed, alright, you’re losing sight of the movement!” Evidently unbeknown to the Chinese student, broadening the discussion to her own experience was a distraction from the demonstration’s goal: *intimidating the school’s administration into doing what the protesters wanted*. For that she was forcibly silenced.

The Only Thing Left to Postmoderns Is Power

PC's fakeness is only outdone by its fanaticism, which has grown with considerable intensity in recent years. Everything from Brendan Eich's firing from Mozilla for donating to Proposition 8 in California, to the eruption of protests on college campuses over the offensiveness of Halloween costumes, to the controversy over state laws that restrict bathroom usage according to biology rather than gender identity, suggest that the postmodern "cult of nondiscrimination" only grows more desperate the more it succeeds. What gives?

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The answer is that the postmodern man ultimately finds satisfaction in the only thing that is left for him: power. Moral superiority is an undeniable source of power over other people, and postmodernism's moral imperative offers it cheaply to anyone who accepts its premises. The power to shut others up by merely insinuating that they are a bigot is subtle, but its potency is difficult to overstate.

Consequently, even as American society becomes more diverse and accommodating, more people nevertheless see senseless discrimination everywhere. As they run out of traditions, institutions, and customs to deconstruct, however, the more diluted the power rooted in their outrage becomes. Hence the growth in moral hysteria over ever smaller and more trivial things.

Until roughly 2014, PC was to many a harmless effort to make people more sensitive and polite. In the words of [Charles C.W. Cooke](#), it was a church lady "tut tutting." But between the Mozilla episode and the campus unrest, many quickly realized that baseless PC outrage against things done or said *in private* could get you fired, scuttle your career prospects, or even humble powerful institutions that fail to heed the demands of adolescents.

It also became clear that its adherents had no intention of letting anyone or anything stand in their way. As soon as the PC outrage machine decides something is wrong with whatever you think, then it has no interest in your thoughts or reasoning: you must submit or remain silent. Just imagine trying to find middle ground with [this protester at Yale University](#) after she likely finds herself in a position of authority.

Trump Turns Postmodernism On Itself

All this raises an uncomfortable question for people who have no use for PC's agenda, and who value the freedom to think for themselves. How do you respond to someone who is determined to smear you for your alleged bigotry regardless of what you think and why? How do you win an argument against someone who willfully changes the meaning of words, maintains that the truth is completely relative, and feels perfectly justified in accusing virtually anyone of the gravest moral failure?

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Enter the right-wing postmodern antihero. Unlike just about every other presidential candidate who ran on the Republican ticket, Trump grasps our postmodern culture intuitively, and put it to use with devastating effect.

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then what's the point in bothering to convince them otherwise? Let's play by their own rules of relativism and subjectivity, dismiss their baseless accusations, and hammer them mercilessly where it hurts them the most: their hypocrisy. After all, if there is no virtue greater than authenticity, and no vice worse than phoniness, then the purveyors of contrived PC outrage are distinctively vulnerable.

Protesting an accusation from the Left that you're not a racist, sexist, etc. on its own terms is a recipe for failure. Recall what happened to Romney when he desperately tried to demonstrate otherwise with his ["binders full of women."](#) Trump offered an alternative: rather than make a fact-based, reason-driven argument, let's neutralize the charge by *denying* its very premises, and in so doing, deny the power of the accuser to render any judgment in the first place.

Right after famously referring to the "rapists" Mexico was sending into the United States when he first announced his campaign, Trump responded to shocked critics by claiming that ["Latinos love Trump and I love them."](#) Similarly, after the emergence of the infamous "Access Hollywood" tape, Trump claimed boldly to audible snickering that ["nobody has more respect for women than I do."](#)

Did anyone *really* take Trump's rebuttals seriously? Obviously not. Still, his preposterous responses demonstrated that accusations of racism and sexism had no power over him, and in our postmodern culture, *that alone* is all that really matters.

Counterpunch the Frauds Where It Hurts

Most importantly of all, Trump understood that postmodern America loathes nothing more than a self-righteous fraud. Hence his reputation for "counterpunching" when confronted with breathless expressions of "offense." Such was evident in his response to Clinton's ["penchant for sexism"](#) remark by bringing up her husband's [history of sexual assault](#). Rather than doing what was expected and taking the high road, apologizing, and moving on, Trump opted to call his accusers out for the most certain fact that their professions of moral outrage are cynical power grab and nothing more.

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Indeed, Trump *provoked* PC outrage precisely for this reason. Like Tony Montana holding the mirror up to his slack-jawed country club audience, Trump pulled one delicious, gasp-inducing stunt after another.

Perhaps the best example of Trump's provoke and win strategy was his approach to immigration. Any proposal for restricting immigration, no matter how modest, will invariably meet charges of nativism and racism. So why fight it? Trump opted to meet the challenge by initially proposing something truly appalling: the deportation of tens of millions of people. When the predictable outrage machine kicked into high gear, he didn't go into damage control as expected. Rather, he dismissed the accusations and let it ride.

After Trump brushed off his hyperventilating critics who were frantically calling him a racist, fascist, and everything in between, their rage gradually abated because it didn't have the desired effect. Now, all of Trump's clarifications on the issue are on the table for consideration, seem reasonable by comparison, and any subsequent PC outburst against them will ring hollow. Like so, Trump tamed and harnessed the outrage machine over and over again: the Muslim ban, killing terrorists' families, insulting John McCain for being a POW, all until it won him the Republican nomination.

This Is How We Get Trump

Democrats gleefully welcomed Trump's victory in the Republican primaries with the expectation that they'd bury him in a pile of condescension for being a buffoon and scorn for being the next Hitler. Better yet, they figured that his astounding rise confirmed everything they had long assumed about half the country and were now free to say out loud: they are *indeed* a basket of irredeemable racist, sexist, homophobic deplorables. Mainstream Republicans would surely hop on board the progressive train rather than be associated with these creeps.

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None of this happened, of course. But why? Because what Trump's enemies failed to grasp was that he wasn't winning because of the crazy things he was saying, but because of *the phony outrage and affected condescension it provoked*. Many people empathized with Trump for enduring the contempt that he deliberately brought against himself. Trump kept playing the role of the antihero, and Clinton kept playing the role of the pearl-clutching fraud.

So I'm a scoundrel because I don't pay income taxes? Maybe so, but it also makes me smart, just like all the other billionaires who are backing your campaign. So I'm a sexist because you found a video of me bragging about how my superstar status enables me to grab women by the p—y? Maybe it does, but allow me to publically introduce four of the women who have accused your husband of everything from indecent exposure to rape. So I'm a greedy businessman who stiffes my contractors? Fine. You're a corrupt politician who sells out our national interest to line your own pockets.

Maybe everything they say about me is true, but at least I'm authentic, at least I'm real: you on the other hand, are a bloody, disgusting hypocrite.

So say goodnight to the bad guy! Because this bad guy is now our president.

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