



## Episode 1,784: Postmodernism Debate: Russell v. Rectenwald

Guest: Michael Rectenwald & Thaddeus Russell

**RUSSELL:** I want to start off by telling everyone where I'm coming from on this, because I think a lot of people sort of, because of what they've been told about "postmodernism" over the last three or four years by people like Jordan Peterson and Sam Harris and the intellectual dark web – not Michael Rectenwald, by the way. Michael Rectenwald is someone who's actually studied this and who I actually respect, and that's one of the reasons I'm here to debate him, because I actually think he really knows this stuff, unlike those guys.

A lot of people have been listening to, though, others, ranting about postmodernism over the last three years, who clearly haven't done the reading. And they assume that anyone who speaks positively about postmodernism is therefore a social justice warrior who wants to throw you off campus and accuse you of being a racist and talk about how the fact that you're a cis white man means everything about you. That's not me. I hate, *hate* everything pretty much that goes on on university campuses. I'm pretty famous for that, as a matter of fact. I've talked about this on Tom's show several times. I've talked about it on my show countless times. I've talked about it all over the place. I am probably better known for my hatred of higher education these days than my admiration for some – let me underscore that – *some* postmodernist thinking.

I believe, and I think Michael will mostly agree with me on this, although I know he doesn't entirely agree with me on this, that what Jordan Peterson and company have been complaining about, what they've been claiming is that "postmodernism," in quotes, is the cause, the source, the intellectual basis of what is now called social justice or identity politics on campus, both of which I absolutely loathe. For me – and I know Michael will at least I think mostly agree with me on this – for me, the sources of that politics are not Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jacques-Francois Lyotard, who are universally known as postmodernist-proper thinkers and philosophers. The source of that stuff coming out of campuses is Frankfurt School. Those are the intellectual granddaddies of this stuff. And I know that Michael has devoted quite a bit of his research and writing and speaking – in fact, I'd say it seems to me like most of what he does is attack the Frankfurt School, for which I say: Hallelujah, God bless you, go, brother.

The people who came over from Germany in the 1930s and '40s who constituted what we now know as the Frankfurt School and the most famous proponents or members of that school of thought are Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse. And let me just say right now, when I was an undergraduate, and I think this was only my second year in college, and this would have been way back in 1986 when I was in college, I wrote a paper on Herbert Marcuse's "Repressive Tolerance" essay. And I thought, because everybody at my college

thought he was the greatest thing in the world, and all of the American left, which I was then a part of, thought he was the greatest thing in the world, I read his essay and I said, this is straight up totalitarianism.

And he's saying in the argument — and everybody should go read it, by the way. It's not hard to read. And Michael and I, we're all on the same page on this, I'm sure. In that essay, which became a book, Marcuse says, well, because capitalism is so repressive in all its ways, by hypnotizing the masses with mass media and entertainment, etc., etc., and false information, it is not just justified, but it is a moral obligation for revolutionaries — and he calls for a worldwide revolutionary — to enact its own repression and to repress any claims that could be associated with the establishment, with traditional power, anything that is part of what they consider to be capitalism. And I also think that their understanding of capitalism was moronic, essentially, and a caricature. So I can say that too.

Now, so that's who I am. I despise what's going on here. I just simply think that the attribution of cause is misplaced. For me — and again, it's really only basically three thinkers. Again, it's Foucault especially, but also Jacques Derrida and Lyotard and a handful of other postmodernists — by the way, there are many people who are called postmodernists who really are smuggling in Marxism in their thinking, and that's a whole other list of thinkers. And we can talk about them separately. I don't like them at all, either. Marxists hate postmodernists. Everyone should go read the *Jacobin* article, which came out last year, attacking Foucault. There have actually been several articles in *Jacobin*, the famous socialist magazine, which is published out of Brooklyn. They despise Foucault, and we can get into why.

But for me, Foucault in particular, is just — oh, let me also add this as to who I am. And I've said this to Tom on his show, I've said it on my show. As for politics, public policy, I have never heard anything spoken by an ancap, an anarchocapitalist, or an Austrian economist that I didn't actually agree with. So I said this to Tom on my show: if I were a congressperson, my voting record would look identical to Ron Paul's. It would be impossible to distinguish between us. In terms of public policy economics and the state, the analysis of the state, I believe that not just libertarians, but that wing of libertarianism is correct. I have been won over in the last — I don't know what it's been, five to ten years, I guess, since I've been studying it. And a lot of this I've learned, as I said to Tom, on his show, but from reading and just being in this world now. That's who I am, everyone. And all I'm saying is, I want libertarians and I want anarchocapitalists to do this. I want them to continue to do exactly what they're doing in politics. When it comes to public policy, economics, and the state, you go. I don't want to change any of that. I don't even necessarily want to modify that.

What I'm saying is that there is a philosophy that has been propounded by a handful of French philosophers, beginning in the 1960s, whom we now call postmodernists, who I think — and by the way, many libertarians are now listening to me, and there's a whole lot of libertarian podcasts, I've just been finding out, that are now embracing this idea. These thinkers I think are a wonderful addition, supplements to libertarian thought, because what they do is they attack particular truth claims.

And they say most of the truth claims they're interested in attacking, if you look at the history of them — and that's what they do. They just write the history of various truth claims. And Foucault was explicit about this. The truth claims that he, and all of them really, have been interested in primarily in attacking — the three I'm talking about: Foucault, Derrida, and

Lyotard — have come from the state. The state has assigned people genders, sexes, races, and all sorts of attributes that they claim to be biological and essential and unchangeable. Those categories largely have been created, and then more importantly, deployed by the state across the world throughout the modern age, almost always for nefarious purposes. Almost always to limit — and here it is — limit the freedom of people.

Because if you say, well, Tom, you know what — and Michael and me, Thad, you're cis, white, hetero men, and that means the following about you. That's what we were being told by social justice warriors, who now — and it is totally true — have now begun to take over not just major media outlets, but also the Democratic Party, a large wing of the Democratic Party. Even Joe crusty Biden, who probably doesn't understand any of this stuff, is speaking the words not of postmodernism, but of the Frankfurt School.

The Frankfurt School is the totalitarian impulse here. It's the totalitarian school of thought that is the origin of all social justice. Michel Foucault and Derrida say, you know what? All these things that the state and authorities have — and by the way, science. In the name of science. Like the COVID scientists right now. The whole army of COVID scientists who are working with the state to do what to us? Imprison us. What Tom Woods has done, heroically, over the last several months is what Foucault did. Foucault said, I am using reason against rationalism, by which he meant scientism, which is the blind faith in authority and in particular scientific authority, which you see in people who wear masks when they're all alone in their cars, because they have heard from authority and scientific authority that that's what you're supposed to do.

And what Tom has done was he has used their own reason, their own scientific method, and their own reasoning to attack this blind faith that whatever Anthony Fauci and all the thousands of scientists who work with government have said is ridiculous. It's an attack on that. It's an attack on that belief, that fundamental just reflexive belief that whatever scientists and the authorities and the state say is true, when all we have to do — and this is what Foucault said, and I'll wrap up here.

What Foucault did in his books, especially — and every libertarian, I promise you if you read Foucault's books, especially his first two major books, *Madness and Civilization* and *Discipline and Punish* — you know what those books are? Those are histories of two institutions, the mental asylum, where the state put people in prisons and called them crazy often for having ideas that Tom Woods and Thad Russell and Michael Rectenwald.

His other book *Discipline and Punish* was a history of the prison, again, the most terrific state institution — correct, everyone? Right? And he shows how the prison was modified in the modern age to be even more repressive and totalitarian, because it insisted, it was built around the project of convincing the prisoners that what they had done, regardless of what they had done, even if they had just sold some marijuana, was evil, bad, uncivil, unseemly for a citizen. They got prisoners to internalize the shame that served the state. Once you internalize shame about these things, about the laws and the norms the state imposes, there is no need for cops or prisons, because we do it to ourselves. We imprison ourselves. And that's exactly what's happening with COVID, right?

So that's where I'm coming from. That's what I want to do. I am simply trying to introduce some elements of what is known as postmodernism into libertarian thought, and it is simply an augmentation. In no way do I think this threatens a piece of it,. not a single piece of all

the major and even minor points that are coming out of libertarianism, Austrian economics, anarchocapitalism. And that is my opening statement. Thank you for listening. Sorry for taking so long.

**WOODS:** All right, thank you, Thad. Michael, now the floor is yours.

**RECTENWALD:** Thank you, Thad, and I appreciate the introduction and I appreciate a lot about what you've just said, and I agree with a great deal of it. I'm on the exact same page with you with reference to the Frankfurt School. Marcuse's essay "Repressive Tolerance" is totalitarianism, absolutely.

**RUSSELL:** Yep.

**RECTENWALD:** The tactics of social justice warriors are absolutely neo-Marxist. They are employing the tactics of neo-Marxism all the way down.

**RUSSELL:** Yes.

**RECTENWALD:** But I have to make a distinction here, and that has to do with the epistemology, which I think is postmodernist epistemology. And you take postmodernism as an anything-goes — it's an anything-goes sort of epistemological subjectivism and skepticism and so forth as epistemic humility, that the rejection of master narratives is liberatory. And on its face, this sounds fine.

But I think there's a problem, and here's what I think the problem is. I differ that, because when coupled with the premium that Foucault and Lyotard and others in the postmodern school have placed on power and power struggles, we have a problem where objective constraints are thrown out. Whenever there is any approach to anything like truth or any criteria for the judgement of facts, this opens us up to the arbitrary imposition of beliefs to authoritarianism. When my truth is as good or better than any objective truth or any attempts to approach it, then when one has power, one can impose one's claims with apparent impunity, because there's no pushback against this belief. There's no objective criteria. There's no court of appeal other than authority.

And that's what we see going on with the SJWs. My truth becomes elevated, and nothing you could say, no court of appeal, no appeal to facts is even allowed. So that's what's getting thrown out with postmodernism. And I don't say that you're throwing it out, but to the extent you are, I think it's a mistake. I have to say that.

We do see this playing out in the social justice movement. If we take transgenderism to be a piece of it, which I do, when such belief is unmoored and backed by mobs and institutions, it leads to the abolition of other people's rights, including their right to speak and in some cases their right to live. One is required to acknowledge the self-described genders of believers and to use their self-assigned pronouns, or else.

Stephen Hicks has a different explanation. He suggests that this authoritarianism and the connection to the epistemology is just incidental, that it just so happens that people like Stanley Fish, who in his most recent book, *The First*, argued for the curtailment of the First Amendment, including eliminating religious speech in the public square and the elimination of

speech that others find offensive or harmful, is just an incidental relationship. And I think it's interesting that Camille Paglia has called Fish a totalitarian Tinkerbell. My explanation is that there is an intrinsic problem here. And that is if we take complete subjectivism, skepticism, and relativism as a recipe, then we open the door to authoritarianism when they have the requisite power to enforce beliefs that have no court of appeal with which to differ with them.

And then the other point I want to make is this, is that crediting postmodernism was with the gains of liberation movements like feminism, black rights, etc. — you know, that postmodernism allows people to escape social constructs — I don't think it's necessary. I don't think that feminism needs postmodernism. Why? Well, I think that even the constructivism of feminism has caused problems for feminists, a great deal of problems. For example, the notion of social constructivism and psychoanalytic theory have become boxes that feminists have been trying to fight their way out of ever since. This kind of social determinism is just as deterministic as biological determinism in the minds of those who hold it. For feminists, this is a never-ending struggle to undo the effects of the patriarchy or the phallus, as in the case of the psychoanalytic feminist followers of Jacques Lacan. But the ironic result, unfortunately, is that gender constructivism, is that now feminism is being run with people with penises. This is what constructivism has allowed to take place. Talk about the patriarchy entering the backdoor.

And that gender as a social construct, as I said, can be as deterministic as biological determinism. And unfortunately, to the degree that you differ with this, I would argue that you're not a postmodernist. Because under postmodern theory, the very notion of the self is denied. It becomes nothing but a mere effect, like a product of language or other social factors. The self is "decentered," that is removed from the center of history and importance and its agency virtually denied. We see this in Foucault and Roland Barthes, a precursor in the post structuralist realm. In their essays "The Death of the Author" and "What Is an Author?" respectively, they argue that authors do not create texts, but texts produce their authors, and by extension, the human subject is a mere product.

And Jean-Francois Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* said that the self is a node, a mere node in a communication circuit. Lyotard demoted the self quite explicitly. He said, each of us knows that our self does not amount to much. A self does not amount to much. And this is hardly a formula for self-determination, which requires individual agency, a belief in individual agency. And that agency is denied, I think, by postmodernism. So libertarianism requires individualism, and postmodernism, unfortunately, denies the individual. And to the extent that you value the individual, which I do believe you do, to that extent, I don't think you're a postmodernist, to be honest. And to the extent that you buy into the denial of the self-determining individual, I'm not sure to what extent you buy it at all, and you wouldn't be libertarian. And that's basically my opening statement.

**WOODS:** All right, so I'll give Thad a couple minutes to respond to that, and vice versa, and then we'll move on.

**RUSSELL:** Cool. Yeah, great. So Michael, you said that you favor — these were your words — objective constraints on discourse.

**RECTENWALD:** Acknowledgement, yes.

**RUSSELL:** Well, you said there really isn't freedom without that without objective constraints on discourse.

**RECTENWALD:** No, not on discourse, objective constraints on how we proceed, because the freedom is meaningless without acknowledgement. It's not meaningful or good without the acknowledgments of these constraints, imposed by the object world and imposed by other people's rights.

**RUSSELL:** So I guess I would ask for specific objective constraints, which is, by the way, what Foucault does. He takes claims about objective constraints that are necessary for this or that purpose, and then he tells the history of them. And he finds in every case an origin, an origin in the minds of human beings, not in God, not in nature. So here's an objective constraint. So in World War I – and I know a lot of Tom's listeners know about this. In World War I, the federal government – and I think this happened in Europe, as well – they put out these budgets for working-class families to follow. They said it is just objectively true that you only need X grams of flour per week. It's objectively true that your children do not need candy, so don't buy any for them. And then this guy named Ludwig von Mises came along, and the Austrian School of Economics came along and said, Well, you know what? Value, guys, economic value, is what? Subjective. And so they threw that out. They demolished in one fell swoop with a brilliant idea – the idea is really more like just throwing off the attempts of this state to tell us what is true, what is objectively a constraint that is necessary for a good civilization, which is what the state tells us constantly. The state and its allies, right?

And here's another objective constraint. You brought up feminism. An objective constraint was placed on women. And this was not just the state; it was the culture at large, but the state absolutely enforced it in all sorts of ways, as we all know. It was just known, it was just "an objective fact," it was "an objective constraint" that women were unable to hold public office, that women couldn't function in the public sphere, that women were best suited to cooking and cleaning and being wives and mothers. And then feminism came along and made a very postmodernist move, because of course, it arose at exactly the time of postmodernism, second wave feminism, in the '60s and '70s.

And they said, you know what? Let's look at the history of this. This whole raft of feminist historians – and this, by the way, was when feminism was good. I can't stand, cannot stand the modern incarnation of feminism, but this in the second wave, parts of the second wave made a crucial, crucial intervention. They said let's look at the history of this. And they found once again that not only were ideas about women's essential biological limitations invented by not just men, men and women, people at particular times in history for particular purposes, but that – here's the thing – those so-called constraints, those rules, those facts about women that were widely believed by scientists, by the state, and by most people changed over time. They changed over time, and they changed over space.

So right now, as we speak, all across Southeast Asia, there are governments that have three, four, or five, six different legal categories of sex and gender. If you've ever heard about the lady boys of Thailand, you know what I'm talking about. These are legal categories established by those governments, even, and by the culture at large. Now, are we to say that they're just wrong and we're right? How do we know that?

But I want to know which objective constraints you want us to hold onto. To me, as a small-L, cultural libertarian – and this is what I'm really talking about here – cultural libertarianism,

cultural freedom, which objective constraints on my discourse do you really want to hold onto and enforce? I find that profoundly actually anti-libertarian.

**RECTENWALD:** Not at all.

**RUSSELL:** Okay.

**RECTENWALD:** Okay, let's take biological determinism, for example. Forget about categories for a minute, like gender categories or race categories and so forth. We are more or less biologically determined, and ignoring the extent of our biological determination can be extremely dangerous. For example, we are biologically determined not to have wings, and thus, unaided, we can't fly. So jumping off a bridge and thinking that one can fly is a dangerous denial of our biological determination. We are more or less biologically determined. The key to it is to find out just how biologically determined we are and in what ways. What areas of our lives are determined biologically and which ones aren't? And then we can proceed apace to develop libertarian approaches to those matters.

And the idea that freedom is some sort of willy-nilly denial of constraints, it's very bad. You've got to acknowledge that there are impositions by the object world and also impositions of other people's rights. Those are constraints. They're constraints that have to be acknowledged. Otherwise, like I said, you'll end up trying to fly off of a building or jumping from the 13th floor of a building, thinking that gravity is a social construct.

Here's the thing. Okay, there's a bit of a conflation going on here, and that is the conflation between knowledge, which is of course in some sense always socially constructed. Knowledge is undoubtedly a social construct, but the object world that it refers to is not. To the extent that we don't change it, it is not socially constructed. So there is a distinction to be made between knowledge and what the knowledge in effect refers to or is at least corresponding to in some sense to a greater or lesser degree. Of course, it's always an asymptotic approach to reality. We never get there, ever. We never really get there. But we have to hold some standard of that, or else we have no guideposts.

And like for example, I think it's really a kind of a conflation also to conflate something like genetics, which is the science, with engineering projects, like eugenics, which is not science. It is an engineering project that's derived from the use of science by some people. And science itself is not one singular, essential entity. And that's a bit of an essentialism, to suggest that it is science. It is a vast array of enterprises undertaken by many different people with many disagreements within them.

And getting back to the issue of gender and sex, there was an introduction in 1955 by John Money, this was the first time that gender, when he talked about gender roles — he was a sexologist, he talked about gender roles, and he introduced this notion of gender into the human discourse with reference to what was then called sex difference. And he used it in the context of what he called gender roles, and then it became gender roles are socially constructed. Absolutely. Gender roles are socially constructed. Then gender is socially constructed. Yes, if we consider that gender is an effect of gender roles, I agree. But the question is about sex. Is sex socially constructed? Our ideas about it might be, but the thing itself isn't. And thank goodness for that, because those who despise the human race might have us never reproducing again. It's necessary to have sex difference for reproduction. This is obviously a point.

And there's different kinds of social constructivism. In fact, I'm considered a moderate constructivist; that is to say, I hold that science represents the natural objects *and* the social and political order, rather than one exclusively. It's not either/or; it's both. This is a standpoint that was developed in science studies, which I studied as part of my PhD and in fact, I write in *The History of Science* that scientific artifacts are consensual products of scientific debate that are both artifactual — that is, constructed — and natural. There's some correspondence between what they refer to. The question is: to what extent are they right?

And why do we need to hold on to science? Let's take a look at Lysenkoism in the Soviet Union, for example. Lysenkoism threw out Darwinian science because it was deemed to be counterproductive to socialism? Why? Because Lysenkoism was a neo-Lamarckian idea. It was the notion of the [inaudible] according to the acquired characteristics. And the reason why socialists preferred that is because then we could change everything, because we can change the social environment; therefore, we can change everything and we can make it according to our social dictates: equality and so on and so forth. But despite Marxism claiming to be materialist and so on and so forth and objective, Lysenkoism was effectively idealist. It didn't have any correspondence to what was the best science at the time. And as a result, you have a state policy that led to widespread famine and death, as well as one of the worst witch hunts in the history of science. This underscores the danger of denying our best science in preference to just *anything goes and they're all just narratives*, right? There was a better biological science at the time. It was called Darwinism and the model of natural selection. Agreement with it could have saved millions of lives.

**RUSSELL:** Okay, I have a question for you. What do you think is subjectively true in terms of causation between one's biology and a socially significant fact? Not jumping off a bridge without wings, but things that public policy can be written around, politics can be formed around. What is it about human beings that is just objectively true? No matter how much we talk about it, it's just a fact, and the fact is socially significant, meaning that our politics can and should be built around it. What about me, what about women, what about black people — again, I didn't even talk about the history of science and race, right? And by the way, let me just add this about women, just that issue — and blacks too, everybody. Science has not changed its mind radically over and over again right up to the present moment about what women are? It certainly has.

**RECTENWALD:** Of course.

**RUSSELL:** Right, so tell me what it is about me or women or anybody that is it just an objective truth that has social significance, politically.

**RECTENWALD:** Well, I don't know the extent to which there's genetic determinism. And one of the reasons we don't know, it has been proscribed, in effect, now on university campuses all over the world, especially in the US and Great Britain. It has been proscribed. We're not allowed to investigate the question because it reeks of eugenics. But it doesn't necessarily reek of eugenics.

**RUSSELL:** Come on —

**RECTENWALD:** We are not allowed to find out the extent to which, for example, evolutionary history has determined something about the male of our species and the female of our species or any other configuration that might arise in our species, such as intersexed people — and I



agree they exist. We don't know the extent to which biology has determined these things, because it hasn't been pursued. That line of inquiry has been cut off. That's one thing.

**RUSSELL:** That's really disingenuous, Michael. Come on, you know —

**RECTENWALD:** No, it's not.

**RUSSELL:** Wait. Okay, so certainly, I mean, I agree with you in English departments and in sociology departments, you are absolutely not allowed to even raise the question. There's no doubt about that. But you know very well that lots of people — Charles Murray is just the most famous again —

**RECTENWALD:** And he wasn't allowed to speak at Middlebury. He was —

**RUSSELL:** No, but his book was a bestseller.

**RECTENWALD:** His book was a bestseller, but he's not allowed to speak at the center of academic discourse.

**RUSSELL:** No, but I'm saying, what Charles Murray's book is convincing to you?

**RECTENWALD:** I'm not going to adjudicate Charles Murray's book.

**RUSSELL:** Well, I don't think that's really —

**RECTENWALD:** That's a trap you're trying to set to lure me into some sort of determinism that will be deemed racist, sexist, or otherwise, so —

**RUSSELL:** That's not at all what I'm trying to do. But I want to say, but come on, it is still disingenuous, because you know that until about five to ten years ago — it's been very recent — people all over the world have been doing just this kind of research, right? And still to this day, there are people doing research in universities about IQ and race and IQ and gender and all that stuff. It is out there. It is abundant. But until very recently, not only was it allowed, that was one of the dominant fields in science and biology. As I've said, until very, very recently, basically until the 21st century, we have stacks and stacks and stacks of books about how women are biologically this or that and to suffer from these nervous disorders because they're women. And we know about blacks and Mexicans and Chinese and Japanese and how they are biologically different from whites, and therefore, we have to do this, that, and the other thing to them. This is all —

**RECTENWALD:** There's a difference between inquiry and state policy, and I'm not advocating for any state policy.

**RUSSELL:** No, but you have 200 years of science, scientists working at places like Harvard and Yale and Columbia and Berkeley and Stanford, right, doing exactly this kind of work.

**RECTENWALD:** Well before they arrival of notions like epigenetics and other various scientific approaches to the question that have not been even touched.

**RUSSELL:** But you said you don't know how much is genetically determined, you said because it's not allowed to be spoken on college campuses, but my goodness, 200 years —

**RECTENWALD:** 200 years, but as you have said, such research would be outmoded by now, and it is.

**RUSSELL:** But why can't you read that research?

**RECTENWALD:** Because it's outmoded. I would like to know what the current —

**RUSSELL:** What do you mean? You can't find it on JSTOR? You can't get it there?

**RECTENWALD:** Sure, you can find it. I'd be interested in it from a history-of-science perspective, but not for adjudicating such claims.

**RUSSELL:** Okay.

**RECTENWALD:** It would be an interesting project on the history of science, but it's not a way of gaining any kind of valid knowledge about the state of —

**RUSSELL:** Okay. Would you agree that science has changed its mind on every, not just these questions, but every single question, repeatedly, constantly?

**RECTENWALD:** Yes, but I think it's like we're conflating — when you say *science*, for example, you conflate all the various sciences. And also, you overlook and paper over intense debate within science about everything too.

**RUSSELL:** Exactly, exactly.

**RECTENWALD:** And let me say this: that science is changing doesn't mean that it's arbitrary. It does not mean that it's arbitrary. It just means that it's asymptotic. It's attempting to reach some conclusions, to reach some facts, or to reach an understanding of fact. I don't believe that facts, as Latour and Woolgar stated in *Laboratory Life*, are mere constructions of language. There's a better model than that, and that is this model of science that we're basically on a ship in the dark, and we're sending out sonar to the coast. We don't get an accurate picture of the coast, but we get some sort of outline that the coast is there.

**RUSSELL:** Do we?

**RECTENWALD:** And that's good, because otherwise we might shipwreck right into it.

**RUSSELL:** Has any scientist ever seen the coast? The truth? Objective reality?

**RECTENWALD:** Not absolutely. No, science does not claim to be able to acquire absolute truth.

**RUSSELL:** Exactly.

**RECTENWALD:** But postmodernism is not necessary for that acknowledgement. It goes all the way back to David Hume in his *Radical Empiricism*, in which he said that basically, the sun rises every day, or so to speak it rises every day, but it might not tomorrow. Effectively, we don't know. It's purely probabilistic what will happen. So science never has claimed this sort of absolutism that you're ascribing to it. Some scientific ideologues or scientists, scientismists, if you will. So what I'm saying is that it's not necessary to invoke postmodernism in order to understand that science is never absolutist. And science has never been claiming to be absolutist. That is an imposition upon it by scientific ideologues and others. And I think that, to the extent that postmodernists do that, they're mistaken.

**RUSSELL:** Well, certainly – come on. Again, I mean, obviously many scientists in history have claimed to have found absolute truth about, again, things like Africans being biologically inferior and women being biologically inferior, and yada, yada. Do I need to go on? I mean, there were absolute truth claims a few hundred years before then that the sun revolved around the earth, and basically, every single person believed that, including virtually every single so-called scientist, every authority, and most importantly, the heads of state and the church. So that was universally believed, and everyone believed that that was the absolute truth that would never be overturned. And in fact, what did they do to people who said, you know what? Maybe the sun doesn't revolve around the Earth? What happened to them? They were, at best, scorned and ostracized, and at worse, they were burned at the stake.

**RECTENWALD:** That's not science burning them at the stake. That's social power burning them at the stake. The other thing is: what's wrong with the Flat Earth Theory, in your estimation? Because if you're a postmodernist, it's any narrative goes. So what's the matter with Flat Earth Theory, after all? Why not just go back to it, or just adopt it for your own good?

**RUSSELL:** What I'm saying is, I operate in my life as if the airplane really does exist And as if the Earth is not flat, that it's round. That's how I operate. All I'm saying – and this is sort of the really deep stuff that ends up being not really socially significant about epistemology, but we can talk about it – all I'm saying is that I don't know for absolute certainty that what I think I'm experiencing is really, really, really objectively true. I mean, because as we know, in other cultures, including American culture not very long ago, not just among primitive tribes on some island in the South Pacific, but we believed that – the society as a whole believed all sorts of things that we now consider to be absolutely comically absurd, right? I mean, just as of like, 30 40, 50 years ago. Even the theory of gravity is being revised as we speak.

I had Donald Hoffman, a very famous cognitive scientist – many listeners might know him. He's been on several podcasts, and I'm sure a lot of your listeners respect him a lot. And I've had him and I've had other scientists tell me, I've had a biologist tell me that true scientists are all postmodernists. Because it's sort of what you said: they don't ever claim to have found the truth. In fact, they say their job is to only disprove science.

**RECTENWALD:** Well, that's true in the case sense. Karl Popper said this in 1961 –

**RUSSELL:** Sure.

**RECTENWALD:** – that falsification is method, not verification.

**RUSSELL:** Yeah, yeah. Yeah, so what I'm saying is I think your history of science is a little bit skewed here. There have been absolutely many scientists who have claimed that they found the absolute truth about something. I also think that there have been many scientists – and I think you would call them good scientists, and I would simply call them postmodernists – who say that no, all we're doing is like knocking down the truth claims established by science. And that's what Donald Hoffman and other scientists have told me. That's what they have said in various places. So again, what I'm calling for is not even a threat to what you think is good science. So what I'm calling for is really not a threat to anybody here who's listening.

**RECTENWALD:** Then what you're calling for is not postmodernism. What you're talking about is probabilism. It's epistemological skepticism, as opposed to nihilism, epistemological nihilism, which is what postmodernism effectively advocates. If you look at Derrida – I'm sorry, he did say it. He did say it, and he said it in the context that I could explain, because I've read the entire book of *Grammatology*: there is nothing outside the text.

**RUSSELL:** Yes.

**RECTENWALD:** Okay, so there's a denial of objectivity. There's an anti-objectivity. There's not just a radical skepticism. There's a nihilism there. And if you don't embrace that, then to that extent, you're not postmodernist.

**RUSSELL:** What Derrida meant, and I think you'd agree –

**RECTENWALD:** I know what he meant.

**RUSSELL:** [laughing] Well, wait. What deconstructionist Derrida and most postmodernists believe is that language is not a pathway to the truth, that we do not find absolute objective reality or truth through language, that it is, again, obviously an invention, a construction of human beings. The English language and even body language, right, it's all constructed by us. And of course, that changes every single minute of every day all over the world. He said there's simply no one-to-one correspondence – here you go – between any particular word and what it claims to represent, or what is claimed it represents. Because these are closed systems of language. No word within English is closer to truth than any other word in the language. And every word in the language, what does it do? It refers to another set of words. If you look in the dictionary, if you look for the definition of any word in the dictionary –

**RECTENWALD:** Yes, I know.

**RUSSELL:** Hold on, hold on. What you see is a list of other words, right? Not just synonyms, but the description is a list of words. So when do you finally get to the end where it's closest to the truth?

**RECTENWALD:** This is not a really profound acknowledgement, that outside of language we can't speak. That's basically, if you want to take Derrida of saying that outside of language we can't speak because there's no language outside of language, that would be a rather unremarkable claim. But he's making more of a claim than that. He's making a claim, that language, of course, is self-referential. But it's more than that, and this is where he's wrong. It's a tool. And to the extent that it works as a tool, it is useful and it can map onto things to an extent greater or lesser, and it helps us manipulate reality. That's a fact. That's how we

know that we can get in an airplane and it'll fly: because the instructions that the pilot has will hold to some extent on most days. Okay, we know that, of course, some days, gravity may not hold. But probabilistically it will. So this is why throwing out science with a postmodern theory is a radical mistake.

**RUSSELL:** Yeah, there's no there's no evidence that he was a nihilistic in that way. And this, again, I think it's just a canard about those thinkers. Derrida and Foucault, especially Foucault, but neither one of them were ever calling for an attack on everything and that they believed in nothing. What they're saying is values, which I hold, we all hold, values, yes, they're social constructions. They're obviously sometimes individually constructed. They weren't saying, if you value freedom, however you construe it, you should not pursue that. No one ever says that. Not among those thinkers. What they simply say is it's a social construction. If you prefer one particular value, one social construction over another, go for it — which is how I operate. All of my values I know are constructions, but I pursue them anyway, because I just don't know that they are somehow absolute, God-given, from nature, immutable, can never be changed. I know that they're inventions, essentially —

**RECTENWALD:** Of course they're inventions, but so was the airplane, and it works. Here's the thing. I could get into why Derrida actually disappears the object world, but it's a long story that goes into semiotics and Saussure and all that, and his conflation of the referent with the signified and all that, and effectively saying language is only the signifier. The signifier signifies not there. And then he conflates the referent with the signified, and as such, he says that the object is not there. He's saying that. I've read it over and over. There's no other way to read it that's not disingenuous, I'm sorry.

**RUSSELL:** Okay, well, you know what needs to happen? People need to actually read these texts for themselves.

**RECTENWALD:** *Grammatology*, 1968.

**RUSSELL:** Yes, *Grammatology* is a tough one, but people need to read these texts themselves. And I'm telling this audience right now, *Grammatology* is very difficult even if you agree with it. Feel free to read it, and I don't think you'll agree with Michael's interpretation of it. But certainly, if you read Foucault's work, the ones that I mentioned, *Madness and Civilization*, *Discipline and Punish*, *History of Sexuality*, which I didn't mention, any libertarian — I'm going to say this right now — any libertarian who reads that and does not find it to be allied with their thinking is doing a very strange reading —

**RECTENWALD:** No —

**RUSSELL:** No, Michael, not an incorrect reading, a strange reading that —

**RECTENWALD:** Foucault has a libertarian streak. There's no question about it, but he's not a — I would admit that without a question, there's a libertarian streak in Foucault. I've said it otherwise. I've said it in other places.

**RUSSELL:** He explicitly embraced what was then called neo-liberalism and the Chicago School and Gary Becker in the 1970s. And that's one of the reasons he's raked over the coals by Marxists. Again, Marxists hate his guts. Look it up. Anybody Google Marxism —

**RECTENWALD:** Not all of them.

**RUSSELL:** Google Marxism and —

**RECTENWALD:** I know what kind of Marxists you're talking about. You're talking about hardcore, orthodox Marxists who say —

**RUSSELL:** Yeah.

**RECTENWALD:** — but there's been an opening up of postmodernism into Marxism, an adoption of various elements and a kind of melding of the two into kind of hybrids of all sorts —

**RUSSELL:** Everyone, Google Marxism and postmodernism, not just Foucault. Do that and you'll see what I'm saying.

**RECTENWALD:** Yeah, I mean, I wouldn't deny that many Marxists say they hate postmodernists. If you look at Frederic Jameson, he was obviously very, very adamant about that.

**RUSSELL:** Yeah.

**RECTENWALD:** But there's amalgamations there that have gone on. And there's some things there I would like to point out, that postmodernism maintains an underlying ethos that is very, very compatible with Marxism, and that is this oppositional notion of underdogism, I would call it, this idea of being oppositional to power, this idea of a classism that's not strict. It's not a strict classism based on economics, but it's nevertheless a kind of class characterization of society. And also, it takes into consideration or it adopts a kind of Nietzschean notion of power, but not as Hicks was saying. It's actually the opposition to power, as if everything is a power struggle and an agonistic one.

Now, let me just say this. The problem with it is, in terms of the free market, it looks at everything as a zero-sum game, and that those who are somehow on the wrong end of the differential always lose. Therefore, you can't have free market exchange because there's no trust. It's always seeming like you're getting ripped off. You're getting screwed by the man. This is very compatible. This underlying ethos runs very, very much in postmodernism, all throughout. It's throughout Lyotard, throughout Foucault, it's throughout Bovaird, whom you may or may not consider one of them. It's throughout all of them. So there's no question. In your own book, your history, which is interesting and I'll probably read it, it's the same way. You're looking at the outcasts, the subalterns. All these things are, these are all compatible with class thinking. And so there is no question. And there is no question that the underlying ethos shares something deeply with Marxism.

**RUSSELL:** Well, underdogism and opposition to power sound pretty good to me, and they sound very libertarian.

**RECTENWALD:** So the only problem with them is this: they assume that every relationship is a zero-sum game in which I'm the underdog is getting screwed. So every transaction — this is very important. Every transaction in which I go to the grocery store because it's bigger than me and they have more money, and I go over there, I'm being f\*\*\*ed. Excuse me, Tom. I'm

being screwed by the man. There's no way that I'm getting value. This is absolutely antithetical to libertarianism.

**RUSSELL:** Who said that? Foucault says that? Derrida says that?

**RECTENWALD:** It's implicit in everything.

**RUSSELL:** Oh, I see. It's implicit. Okay.

**RECTENWALD:** No, of course, everything is a power differential, and the reader is always invoked or interpolated as an underdog who can't win and that every transaction puts you on the bottom, and therefore every transaction is viewed with suspicion. The free market itself is seen as a place where inequitable transactions are taking place. There's not a free market. Nobody among the postmodern school would embrace the free market. It's considered some place where the dominant always win. That's a fact. They don't see, like Mises, that the consumer has the power. They see the producers having all the power.

**RUSSELL:** Okay, so that is most certainly in Marcuse, Lyotard, and Adorno, the Frankfurt School, absolutely clear, explicit hostility to the market, to capitalism, all of it. You tell me where you find what you just said in Foucault, Derrida, or any postmodernist theories.

**RECTENWALD:** The market is another institution for Foucault, just like —

**RUSSELL:** You show me where he says that, any of that, what you just said. And what I really need for people to do is not take my word for this or Michael's word for this. He's invoking these texts, or he's claiming certain things in the texts, and we don't have the text in front of us. People can do three things. I strongly recommend this. Take Michael's course on postmodernism and critical theory at Liberty Classroom, and take my course called "What is Postmodernism" at Renegade University. And I don't know if you do this. I'm sure you do. But I do in my course. I do a reading. We look at —

**RECTENWALD:** Of course.

**RUSSELL:** Yeah, I'm sure you do. We put the text on the screen and read through it together.

**RECTENWALD:** Yeah.

**RUSSELL:** And so take those courses and read the texts yourselves. And you tell — but you can't just sort of make these claims that the text says X, and then when I —

**RECTENWALD:** But that's what postmodernists do. The text says whatever I want it to be. It's response theory.

**RUSSELL:** Hold on. I mean, okay. Look, I mean, you can't say, when I want to ask you, where does it say this, you say, well, it's implicit. So you can't really do that.

**RECTENWALD:** It's explicit in terms of some institutions, but it's easily extended to the marketplace. There's an anti-capitalist strain all throughout postmodern theory.

**RUSSELL:** There's an anti-statist strain in Foucault.

**RECTENWALD:** Not just statist, it's anti-capitalist as well. Look at Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition*. It's everywhere.

**RUSSELL:** Lyotard, definitely I agree with you. I like half of what he says, and half of it is sort of warmed over Marxism. I agree with you. I'm mostly talking about Foucault and Derrida, whom everyone agrees are the major postmodernist thinkers.

**RECTENWALD:** Well, I mean, say Lyotard's the one that actually gave the school of thought, if it can be called that, its name.

**RUSSELL:** His critique of metanarratives is wonderful and every libertarian should totally appreciate it.

**RECTENWALD:** The only thing is, it is a metanarrative. So I mean, it's self-refuting. There is no truth. It's a truth claim. So that's self-refuting. *There are no metanarratives* is a metanarrative, so that's self-refuting. What else you got?

**RUSSELL:** No, no, no, no, no. He called for skepticism toward metanarratives, like the king has the divine right to the crown, to sovereignty, that metanarrative, right? That was a big really big one for a long time. There's all sorts of metanarratives now, aren't there, about America —

**RECTENWALD:** Yes, like postmodernism.

**RUSSELL:** What? No, it's a —

**RECTENWALD:** Postmodernism is a metanarrative, indeed. It is a metanarrative that metanarratives should not be this or that or metanarratives should be disavowed or metanarratives should — it is a metanarrative in its own right.

**RUSSELL:** No, it's a suggestion that we should be skeptical of them. It does not say that there is no such —

**RECTENWALD:** Did you just make a truth claim?

**RUSSELL:** No, I said —

**RECTENWALD:** Well, okay, then. Well, then should I disregard it? Because I don't know what to make of it if it's not a truth claim.

**RUSSELL:** Of course you can disregard it. It's a suggestion.

**RECTENWALD:** Should everybody disregard it? That's what I'm asking.

**RUSSELL:** It's a suggestion. If you like it, take it up. And if you don't like it, walk away from it. This is the beautiful thing about it. No one's requiring anyone to do anything with this. These are suggestions.



**WOODS:** All right, let me jump in here. I've been pretty laissez-faire, but just because people want you guys to have it out. I want to do two things, and we're going to wrap up.

**RUSSELL:** Okay.

**WOODS:** One, I want each of you to ask the other one a question. Not a speech at each other. A question. You've got to say the question in like 15 seconds. One question. The other person has a couple minutes to answer. And then the other one will ask the other one a question. And then I'll give you each a minute or two to wrap up for the whole thing and maybe summarize where you think the other person's misconceptions lie or something like that. But let's start with Thad. Let's start with you. What's one quick question you want Michael to answer?

**RUSSELL:** What do you find of value for libertarians — because I guess this is what we're really talking about here, right? What do you find of value for libertarians in Michel Foucault's work?

**RECTENWALD:** That's a good question. I think I would not throw out — Michel Foucault is the most redeemable of all of the postmodern theorists and his histories of discipline, *Discipline and Punish*, his history of the asylum in *Madness and Civilization*, these are worthwhile texts to look at absolutely, because they talk about the historicism of these various — for example, in *Discipline and Punish*, he historicizes the history of punishment, which is transmuted into discipline and then becomes metastasized and spreads throughout the whole social body. We live in a disciplinary society. I kind of agree. His panopticism is definitely worthwhile. We're living in a panopticon right now. No question about it. So there's that. And I would say, what I differ with — and I know you didn't ask me that — is sort of the notion or absolute nihilism with reference to the self, this kind of anti-individualism, this idea that the self is nothing but this effect of language or power or discourse or what have you. This to me is anathema to libertarian thought.

**RUSSELL:** I think Foucault is profoundly individualistic as a matter of fact, but, your turn.

**WOODS:** All right, Michael, your question.

**RECTENWALD:** Okay. What do you think postmodern — say we had a state, and the head of this state — whatever kind of position they call it, president, ruler, whatever — was a postmodernist. How do you think such a state would operate?

**RUSSELL:** [laughing] That's like asking if Tom Woods were head of the Fed, like what would —

**RECTENWALD:** Well, some people claim that Donald Trump is a postmodernist, for example. So what do you think would happen?

**RUSSELL:** It's an impossible question to answer, because I mean, these guys — again, postmodernism, always, as I read it, places itself outside of power, as a critic of power. It's an attitude or an orientation to power, which is one of constant skepticism. Constant skepticism. I can't imagine a more fundamentally libertarian way of being than to be constantly skeptical of power and authority.

**RECTENWALD:** Or seeing it where it's not.

**RUSSELL:** Yeah, so I mean, to me, there is no such thing as a postmodernist state.

**RECTENWALD:** It's a hypothetical question. It could it could happen, couldn't it? I mean, everything's possible.

**RUSSELL:** So reification is a big postmodernist word, right? We haven't talked about yet. It's the making of ideas into *real* things into facts, in a sense, or attempting to, at least. So once you become the head of a state, you obviously have reified the state and all of its power, all its function. So that's simply not what a postmodernist Foucault or Derrida or even Lyotard would ever do. They would always stand outside of it. I think that's what they are inviting us to do, again, inviting or suggesting that we do, that we stand outside of power, that we never merge our identities with power and certainly never with the state. And even by the way –

**RECTENWALD:** I would disagree with that. They believe in –

**RUSSELL:** Wait, can I answer your question?

**RECTENWALD:** Yeah, sure.

**RUSSELL:** By the way, and so also corporations, right? And I'm talking to an audience that knows very well that basically every corporation in the United States and in Europe has this state helping it in all sorts of ways that are not free-market mechanisms, right? So even corporations, that's power, much of which has been bestowed upon them by the state. Be skeptical of them too when they make claims, as they are now ,about white supremacy being everywhere and if you don't have a Black Lives Matter sign on your window, you are a racist. These are essentialist claims. If you're white, you are this, that, and the other thing; if you're black, you're these other things. That's all essentialism. It's social justice essentialism. It's also fundamentally racist, and it comes from the Frankfurt School, and it comes from actually race science of the 19th century.

And Foucault and Derrida and the rest did everything they could to take direct aim at exactly that kind of thinking. Social justice is anathema, it is the opposite, it is a refutation of social justice, social justice politics and identity politics, where it is claimed that your identity means everything about you, and nothing you can do about it will change that. And it is your destiny. Your parts, your body parts, your skin color, that's your destiny, buddy. That's what's being told to us now. It's what was told to us in the 19th century by scientific racists, and that's exactly what postmodernists went after, was these essentialist, naturalist claims about human beings as individuals and attempts, by the way, to make them into groups, to force them into groups, to force them into women or force them into black people or force them into Americans, right? This is why I say it is completely consistent with a politics and an ethos of individualism, postmodernism. So there's my answer.

**WOODS:** Okay, all right. Let's each just – because we've got a hard out here, so let's do two minutes apiece to just say whatever you want to say. But let's try and keep to two minutes piece. So first Thad, then Michael. So Thad, go.

**RUSSELL:** Okay, I was just talking but I mean, yeah, I think I've made my case. I just really do – please. Jordan Peterson basically started this conversation about three years ago when he started talking about how the speech codes in Ontario were postmodernist, and then we

found out after having listened to him talk about it for a while that Jordan never read anything, really, except I think maybe half of one book of Foucault. Those speech codes say that trans people are born a particular way. It's just not the way that society says they are, but they were born in a particular way and there's nothing we can do about that. That is exactly contrary to Foucault and queer theory that came out of Foucault and feminism of the '60s and '70s, all of which said that your body is not your destiny. Your body is not your destiny. I don't know why anybody who believes in individual personal liberty would not embrace that critique.

**WOODS:** Okay, Michael, final word.

**RECTENWALD:** Okay, yeah, I would just say to start that, as I said in the beginning, this kind of idea of epistemological subjectivism is wide open to being marshaled by and used by people that will impose their particular belief without restraint from the object of other people's rights on other people. Because we have no court of appeal outside of people's claims about narratives and so forth, it lends itself to being used for authoritarian purposes. That's what I was getting at with the question. Whether it's absurdist or not, there's a lot of absurdism in postmodern theory, so I certainly have my right to engage in a little here.

But I think what we have going on here is Thaddeus is not really a postmodernist. I think that he's actually just a good, old-fashioned classical liberal who individualism, who values individual rights, who values the individual as the locus of value, and sees that as the main determining factor. This is all just an extension of classical liberalism, the idea of when we get into group constructs and all that leads to disasters. And the answer is not to go back to social constructivism, which focuses on and then reifies these categories by virtue of constantly referring to them and seeing them as the all-determining elements, whether they're perpetrated by the state or social institutions or other things, when in fact a kind of demotion of that way of thinking will lead us into individualism, into thinking of people as individuals, not as members of groups.

Now, you might say that because they're deconstructing these categories, that they're trying to liberate people from them. But as a matter of fact, it's led to all these grievance studies, which is about different categories and how they're struggling on this hierarchy to achieve such-and-such, and they're always underdogs. They're underneath somebody. They're on some sort of totem pole where they're at the bottom and the object, of course, is to get to the top. This is definitely derived from postmodernism. Many other things are not. Many other tactics of the social justice movement come from Maoism, struggle sessions and auto critique, of course.

But the epistemological element is not incidental. It's not unimportant, and it's not really academic. It lays the foundation for all of the abuses we're seeing in these college campuses today, the imposition of people's identity politics on others. There's no question identity politics has a postmodern provenance. And it is a problem because it is constantly focusing on groupism and it's constantly reconstructing and reifying the very categories that it claims to be undoing.

**WOODS:** All right, well, I know you both have more that you could say, but we're going to wrap it up there. Websites, where should I link people who want to follow each of you guys? Thad first.

**RUSSELL:** [RenegadeUniversity.com](http://RenegadeUniversity.com). You can take my course on "What is Postmodernism?" there.

**WOODS:** Ah, okay, and you can also take Michael's course on postmodernism at [LibertyClassroom.com](http://LibertyClassroom.com).

**RUSSELL:** Yes.

**WOODS:** Michael, do you have a website or anything you want to link people to?

**RECTENWALD:** Yes, it's [MichaelRectenwald.com](http://MichaelRectenwald.com).

**WOODS:** All right, both of those things will be linked at [TomWoods.com/1784](http://TomWoods.com/1784). My thanks to both of you gentlemen.

**RUSSELL:** Thank you.

**RECTENWALD:** Thank you.