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Moral Relativity Is a Hot Topic? True. Absolutely.

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**BODY:**  
"Are you now or have you ever been a postmodernist?"

With that ominous echo of McCarthyism, Stanley **Fish**, postmodern provocateur and dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago, begins his defense of **postmodernism** in a symposium in the summer issue of The Responsive Community ([www.gwu.edu/ccps](http://www.gwu.edu/ccps)), a quarterly political journal edited by Amitai Etzioni. Clearly, Mr. **Fish** continues, no one has yet threatened to treat postmodernists like traitorous Communists, but "it's only a matter of time," he says. A new version of "America, love it or leave it!" is in the making, he claims, "and the drumbeat is growing louder." A "few professors of literature, history, and sociology," he asserts, are now being told that they are directly responsible for "the weakening of the nation's moral fiber" and that they are indirectly responsible for the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11.

This seems bizarre indeed. **Postmodernism** -- familiarly called pomo -- has its roots in French and German philosophy, but surely it has proven itself to be loyally all-American. True, it has courted controversy, and has been accused of failing to recognize self-evident moral truths and even scientific fact. Still, for decades the term has thrived in university literature and history departments and among communities of artists, and it has been associated with pastiche, irony, relativism and iconoclasm.

But now Mr. **Fish**, fearing the growing drumbeat, has mounted a campaign to defend pomo. His views are the focus of the journal's symposium, "Can Postmodernists Condemn Terrorism?," in which his often idiosyncratic interpretations are challenged by academic luminaries like Richard Rorty, Benjamin R. Barber and Cass Sunstein. Mr. **Fish** also raises the pomo flag in "Postmodern Warfare: The Ignorance of Our Warrior Intellectuals," a cover article in the July issue of Harper's magazine

And who, Mr. **Fish** asks, has made such defense necessary by trafficking in a new "brand of scapegoating"? He mentions Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell but also "our most distinguished newspapers." This is one of those papers, and I am among the pioneers in Mr. **Fish's** imagined witch hunt.

That is because on Sept. 22, my Connections column suggested that the destruction of the World Trade Center and the attack on the Pentagon could upset the presuppositions of two major academic movements: **postmodernism** and postcolonialism. **Postmodernism**, I argued, challenges the notion of objective truth and rejects the possibility of a transcendent ethical perspective. Surely, I asked, what just happened cries out for some different understanding?

As for postcolonialism, which treats Western imperialism as the Original Sin of modern history, it is prepared to view any act against the West as a reaction to an injustice perpetrated by the West.

Surely, that, too, would require some revision, given the totalitarian and fundamentalist goals of this opponent? Such doctrines, I suggested, will have a hard time condemning acts of terror in the ways they deserve.

This argument apparently touched a nerve, for criticism of **postmodernism** increased until Mr. **Fish** felt called upon to defend it on Oct. 15 on the Op-Ed page of The **New York Times**. Since then, the controversies, if anything, have become more heated. The "flap" about pomo, he proclaims in Harper's, signifies very little "apart from the ignorance of those who produced it."

But what is the nature of Mr. **Fish's** defense? And is there any connection between pomo ideas about truth and current battles against Islamic terrorism?

First of all, Mr. **Fish** argues that my assertion that postmodernists challenge the existence of objective truth is all wrong, and so is my assertion that pomo has anything to do with relativism. Postmodernists do not deny the existence of truth, Mr. **Fish** declares, in fact he believes in it. What postmodernists do claim, he says, is that there is no "independent standard of objectivity." This means that there is no way a truth can be definitively proved to others.

This argument would not be universally accepted among postmodernists, and it still doesn't rescue **postmodernism** from relativism. For in the end, whether Mr. **Fish** or anybody else believes in the existence of truth is irrelevant. The crucial point is that he believes that there is no reliable standard for proving it to an opponent.

But doesn't that lead to a form of relativism? An observer might note that each party to a quarrel asserts a different truth, yet conclude that both are equally valid because neither can be objectively proved false. In Fishean pomo, all we have are competing claims, whether the issue is the numerical value of pi or the assertion that the Mossad destroyed the World Trade Center.

But why should there be no way to definitively judge such matters? Mr. **Fish** argues that if such standards existed, we would have universal agreement. But why does the existence of disagreement, obstinacy, error, blindness or stupidity undermine the possibility of objectively judging truth? In the mess of life, whether in the courtroom or the classroom, efforts are made all the time to establish truth objectively; sometimes they fail, sometimes they succeed. Some standards are discovered; others may never be found.

But even if we accept Mr. **Fish's** arguments, other problems arise. He wants to proclaim pomo's innocence of any charges against it, because, he says, its arguments don't really affect behavior. **Postmodernism**, he writes in Harper's, "is a series of arguments, not a way of life or a recipe for action." Yet Mr. **Fish** treats truth not as an objectively verifiable ahistorical object but as something that is wrestled over in the midst of daily life. Convictions, he argues, are supported by invoking "received authorities, sacred texts, exemplary achievements and generally accepted benchmarks." Mr. **Fish** has even compared the establishment of scientific truth to a game of baseball; it is judged according to the rules of the game.

The establishment of truth, for Mr. **Fish**, is a sociological matter. "Truth" is acknowledged by others not as a result of indubitable proof but as a result of power or reward or rhetoric. Can't this change expectations and behavior and even alter attitudes toward war? If truth cannot be established on its merits, then guilt and doubt may come into play when using force in the name of that truth, particularly when the arbitrary exercise of power is one of the opponent's charges.

In the symposium, Mr. **Fish** seems to backpedal a bit, arguing that pomo might actually have an effect. It might, he suggests, teach us to understand the opponent not as an evil abstraction but as a fellow human being with his own motivations. Mr. **Fish**, for example, says that when Reuters stopped using the word terrorism because "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter," this policy was mistakenly attacked as pomo-style cultural relativism. Actually, he argues, Reuters saw that the word was "unhelpful" because, in Mr. **Fish's** words, it "prevents us from making distinctions" that might allow us to get a better picture of whom we are fighting.

But this explanation is disingenuous. Mr. **Fish** is really saying that he prefers one set of distinctions over another -- distinctions that, in this case, emphasize resemblance, or perhaps even symmetry,

between the terrorist and his opponent, while ignoring the central differences, including the fact that this is a war against Islamic terrorism and its totalitarian ideologies.

Finally, pomo is bound to affect interpretations of the war because **postmodernism** bears a peculiar relationship to the West itself. As I argued in September, the insistence that differing perspectives be accounted for and that the "other" be comprehended is an outgrowth of Western science and Western liberalism. **Postmodernism** evolved from those Enlightenment ideas. But then, in the name of those same principles, pomo challenged the West's claims for priority over competing perspectives, criticizing its philosophical idealism and its notions of objectivity.

The war now taking shape may even be related to the principles that gave birth to **postmodernism**. Avatars of absolutism -- terrorist Islamic fundamentalists -- are challenging the liberal democratic societies of the West, objecting to their power, their values, their differing creeds, their modern (and postmodern) perspectives. This is something Mr. **Fish** recognizes. But **postmodernism** tends to retain its old critical habits. So when postmodernist arguments are applied to the war, they often seem directed at the West, relativizing its claims and qualifying condemnations of the opposition.

Of course, pomo isn't directly or indirectly responsible for 9/11. But cannot pomo be taken to task for its views and effects without Mr. **Fish** and others retreating into McCarthy-era rhetoric, posing as victims of Western absolutism? They are acting as if they are not quite secure in their possession of the truth.

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**GRAPHIC:** Photos: The Sept. 11 attacks have led to criticism of postmodernists, now defending their views. (Chang W. Lee/The **New York Times**)(pg. B7); Stanley **Fish**, a postmodernist, says there's no objective standard for proving truth.(pg. B9)

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