

## FEATURE

### DEBATE: POSTMODERNISM AND HISTORY

#### REVIEW ESSAY

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##### *History and Postmodernism*

Beth Lord and James Tomlinson

Callum Brown, *Postmodernism for Historians*. Pearson Longman, 2005, Paperback, ISBN 0 582 50604 2, pp. 200, £14.99.

Willie Thompson, *Postmodernism and History*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, Paperback, ISBN 0 333 96339 3, pp. 1x + 161, £12.99.

#### **Introduction**

In *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), Friedrich Nietzsche criticises the historians of his time for confusing purposes with origins. It is a mistake, he says, to treat the utility of a concept or practice as if it meant something regarding the origin of that concept or practice, for 'whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed, and redirected by some power superior to it' (Nietzsche, 1967: p. 77). As Foucault will reiterate eighty years later, Nietzsche states that the meaning and purpose of historical practices is contingent upon the uses to which dominant power structures put them. Thus the history of things and customs cannot be a story of progression towards a goal, but rather the succession of multiple processes of the increase and decrease of power.

This can be seen as an early expression of postmodernism in history. It comes from a philosopher whose aim was, in part, to shake up the practice of history, particularly amongst late nineteenth-century historians of morality. For Nietzsche, the history of moral values must begin by dismantling the assumption that moral values of good and evil are fixed, necessary, and transcendent, and the assumption that human beings are fundamentally rational, free, and progressing towards moral perfection. Postmodern philosophy, or poststructuralism, has worked in the Nietzschean tradition to displace metaphysical certainties – such as the free subject, the truth of language, and the continuity of history – by arguing that their

grounds are not fixed and permanent but contingent, shifting, and unstable. This clears the way not for a crude relativism, but rather for new possibilities for human thought and action. Postmodernism and poststructuralism do not pursue a negative aim to destroy truth and to create a moral and epistemological void in which 'anything goes'. Rather, these movements have a positive project to affirm the productive possibilities of disrupting and resisting fixed certainties, values and oppositions.

It is much to their credit that both Callum Brown and Willie Thompson, in their introductory books on postmodernism and history, recognise this positive aim, without which postmodernism would be of little value to history, as its critics frequently contend. Both authors make clear that postmodernism neither denies that the past happened, nor propounds an 'anything goes' relativism about historical interpretation. Both recognise that postmodernist theories have had a major impact on the thinking of history in the last thirty years, linking to progressive political positions that have opened history up to previously marginalised voices. On whether postmodernism has had a positive impact on history, however, the authors are divided, with Brown stating in his opening sentence that his book '*promotes* the use of postmodern theory in History' and Thompson declaring himself a sceptic. But what they set themselves up to be for or against is a vastly oversimplified version of postmodernism as an intellectual movement. While both books contribute to a broad understanding of the postmodern turn in history, both miss much of what is genuinely new and interesting about postmodernism, because the object of study has not been considered in enough depth.

The stated purpose of Brown's book is to promote interest in postmodernism amongst historians by giving 'priority to demonstrating postmodernism as theory and as applied method in History' (p. 2). This is pursued through six core chapters which in turn give summary accounts of key concepts: sign, discourse, post-structuralism, text, self and morality. This expository purpose is in many respects admirably achieved. Brown gives clear, concise accounts of a wide range of postmodern theories in a way which should be accessible to any reader seriously concerned to learn. In most chapters the application of these theories is illustrated by recent historical work that draws upon them, significantly enriching the argument. Each chapter also includes suggestions for students to incorporate postmodernist methods into historical research. If exposition slides readily in to advocacy, this is no great fault. Precisely because Brown has found postmodernism so energising he conveys this enthusiasm to the reader, encouraging historians to approach new topics and to try new methods without losing the rigour of empirical research. Brown is an advocate for the cause, arguing that postmodernism as 'a way of understanding knowledge' (p. 9) is responsible for grounding progressive political positions such as feminism, postcolonialism, and queer theory. Postmodernism, for him, is a method of rational thought that grounds 'the humanistic desire for personal freedom' (p. 150) and enables empiricist historiography to work in the service of social equality.

Thompson's book takes a historical view of postmodernism, explaining in its opening chapters how its theories developed and differ from those of modernist philosophy and structuralism, and going on to examine in each chapter a different problem of representation: emplotment, power, relativism, and metanarrative. Like Brown, Thompson illustrates theory with examples of historical studies, but does not offer suggestions for the student because he clearly opposes the adoption of postmodernism in history. Thompson suggests that postmodernism has developed nothing worthwhile that was not already achieved by Marxist social history or indeed Rankean history. The theoretical positions that remain, those unique to postmodernism, are, in his view, 'a Bad Thing, inimical to rational thought and to the future of historical study' (p. 5). This view sets the tone for a book almost wholly antagonistic to postmodernism and its practitioners in history.

There is much to be said for an illustrated thematic approach when it comes to introducing postmodernism. But both writers take absolutely the wrong starting-point in uncritically maintaining the value of rational thought, for this is precisely what postmodernism questions. Thompson is, ironically, right that postmodernism is 'inimical to rational thought', not because postmodernism is nonsense (as he strongly suggests it is), but because it seeks to show that the claim of rational thought to be foundational for truth and action is illusory, and thus to undermine the uncritical use of this accepted concept. Related to his claim that postmodernism grounds a notion of personal freedom, Brown asserts that postmodernism has a moral agenda to dismantle 'immoral' structures and to 're-centre the individual as agent of action' (p. 78). Brown is, broadly, correct that postmodernism aims at progressing a certain concept of human freedom, but it does this on the basis of a thorough critique of the fixed and foundational nature of concepts of subjectivity, freedom, progress, and moral value.

The problem with both these books is that they largely ignore the philosophical thrust of postmodernism and take it to be little more than a method, derived from literary and cultural studies, for critical reflection upon the practice of history. While it is correct to call postmodernism a set of practices rather than a fixed body of thought, these practices are not simply interpretive tools to be deployed alongside traditional empirical methods within the discipline of history. As practices, they present a new way of thinking about thinking, and create new solutions to problems: postmodernism is properly philosophical in that sense. But when postmodernism is equated with the watered-down version of it presented by cultural studies, its failings and contradictions become all too apparent. Postmodernism becomes, for Thompson, a straw man, and for Brown, a set of methods to be deployed in empirical research. Brown's aim is laudable, and his is the superior of the two books in that it recognises the progressive possibilities of postmodernism as a practice, and explains them in clear, practical language. Thompson, by contrast, is prevented by his distrust of difficult texts and his antagonism to theory from engaging in meaningful critical dialogue with postmodernism. Thompson's book has the undoubted merit of outlining the historical development of postmodernist

ideas, but beyond that virtue, its fundamental hostility to philosophical and indeed theoretical thinking makes it of limited interest to those who want to take such thinking seriously. In what follows, therefore, we concentrate most of our attention on Brown's book, which offers the positive engagement that Thompson does not deliver.

There are three broad themes under which these two books might be discussed. For brevity these can be listed as 'the politics of postmodernism', 'postmodernism and enlightenment' and 'postmodernity, modernity and reality'. These three narratives have much in common, but can be summarised and problematised separately.

### 1. The politics of postmodernism

Both Brown and Thompson are centrally concerned with the politics of postmodernism: that is, the fact that postmodernist positions have tended to be associated with left-wing politics. For Brown, postmodernism is the basis of a progressive political freedom, whereas for Thompson, it leads to a dangerous relativism about scientific and political issues.

Brown is clear that the defining character of postmodernism is epistemological. Its 'two core principles' are that 'reality is unrepresentable in human forms of culture' and that 'with an inability to represent reality, no authoritative account can exist of anything' (pp. 6–7). This is coupled to the strong assertion that 'postmodernism is not an ideology. It is not like Marxism, or liberalism, or conservatism, or fascism ... however, postmodernism does have ideological implications. It *enables* a whole host of ideologies to exist. These include feminism, postcolonialism, gay liberation and queer theory' (p. 8, italics in original). This huge assertion, that certain epistemological positions 'enable' a set of 'progressive' political agendas, is the political metanarrative of the book. It is a connection which is never justified at length, but the key term in asserting the link seems to be 'essentialism' (e.g. pp. 65, 87, 118, 124).

The central argument is that non-progressive politics (racism, sexism, etc.) rely on notions of human essences which postmodernism has undermined, and hence that postmodern epistemology leads directly to anti-racism, anti-sexism, etc. But this will not do. Racism, sexism and all other non-progressive causes are not fixed entities that uniformly rely on 'essentialising' humans. Of course some versions of 'sexism' or anti-feminism do depend on notions of women's eternal essence; but many do not. Friedrich Hayek's anti-feminism, for example, while never argued through, seems to rest on a Burkean-style reverence for established social norms, as against any 'abstract principle', essentialist or otherwise. In other words, essentialism is only one possible ground for reactionary political positions. Furthermore, it is surely the case that an adherent of postmodernist epistemology can also be an advocate of reactionary causes. For example, imperialism can and has been defended not on grounds of essential differences between the inhabitants

of metropolitan countries and their empires, but because of contingent historical accidents which gave the metropole economic, political, and social superiority which it then had a 'mission' to export to the colonies. However much one may disagree with such arguments, they cannot be reduced to the product of essentialism, and therefore cannot be refuted by postmodern (or indeed any other) epistemology as Brown presents it.

Despite Brown's disclaimer noted above, postmodernism in this book does function as an ideology in the sense that it provides 'off the shelf' answers to political problems according to some limited number of guiding principles. This produces an implicit Utopian politics, because the implication of the 'essentialist' argument is that if we all shared postmodern epistemological views we could all support a happy progressive consensus ('Democracy is based on the absence of a single past. ... Relativity thus becomes ... the very basis of political freedom' (p. 149)). But epistemology is not so powerful a political weapon, or to put it the other way about, political positions are not emanations of singular epistemological principles. To suggest that epistemology and politics have this straightforward linear relation is, in fact, to ignore the complexity of Foucault's argument that political power determines epistemic functions of truth, reality, and morality and enables them to hold sway, just as epistemic conditions are the condition of possibility of the rise of certain power structures. What is missing from Brown's account is an analysis of how postmodernism understands the complex causal relations between epistemic positions and political and ideological power.

Brown's assertion that postmodernism is the ground of liberal values also cannot stand without further critical scrutiny. He claims that postmodernism grounds human freedom, social equality, and individual action – and yet, at the same time, postmodernism for Brown is supposed to subvert the concepts of Enlightenment modernity. The problem that postmodernism both undermines and makes use of historical concepts of progress, freedom, and action is intrinsic to postmodernism and has been well discussed in the literature, not least by Foucault himself (see his essay 'What is Enlightenment?'). But Brown declines to take up this problem, and instead makes postmodernism the epistemic ground for a liberal project to increase social justice. Unfortunately, this means that Brown's position gives itself over to Thompson's critique: casting postmodernism as the ground of liberal values leaves Brown open to the charge that in terms of its politics, postmodernism is not relevantly different from Marxism or, for that matter, classical Millian liberalism.

This is a shame, because Thompson's position that the political gains of postmodernism can equally be achieved through a Marxist approach is untenable. Postmodernism does indeed bear a debt to Marx. But in attempting to reduce what is good in postmodernism to a variant of Marxist social theory, Thompson misses the point: postmodernism's closeness to Marx cannot be separated from its critique of fixed concepts of society and political action. Where Thompson recognises postmodernism's rejection of Marxist concepts and ideals, he criticises its inattention to the concrete suffering of the oppressed, its invalidation of the

concept of class, and its slide into a dangerous political groundlessness (e.g. pp. 45–9, 51–5, 91–6, 100–2). Thompson here confuses the rejection of a fixed ideal with the rejection of real experience. Postmodernism recognises inequalities and realises that ideologies that claim to be fixed and foundational will never succeed in undoing those inequalities. The liberal ideal of ‘perpetual peace’ has no place in a postmodern politics, but strategies to move beyond fixed oppositions and power relations certainly do. (For a good discussion, see Williams 2005, pp. 18–22). The fact that postmodernism wants to produce new ways of thinking about political and social relations – ways beyond the static oppositions of oppressor and oppressed, for instance – does not mean that postmodernism opposes democracy or treats oppression and violence as merely ‘linguistic constructs’ (Thompson, p. 54). Rather, postmodernist thinking works, in the spirit of Marx, to improve political structures through recognising and resisting relations of power. It is, as James Williams puts it, a matter of ‘keeping democracy alive through creative transformation’ (Williams, 2005: p. 21).

## 2. Postmodernism and Enlightenment

The second metanarrative identifiable in both books is one concerning the ‘Enlightenment’. Both Brown and Thompson follow many postmodernist critics in their characterisation of the Enlightenment as ‘the modern that postmodernism revolts against. It is the other of postmodernism; not only that which preceded postmodernism but that in opposition to which postmodernism defines itself as discovery and new beginning’ (Gordon, 2001: p. 1). Brown pulls no punches in his characterisation of the negative side of the Enlightenment: ‘the Enlightenment stands accused of *intellectualising* (not necessarily originating) some of the key problems of the world from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries’ (p. 24, emphasis in original). He goes on to list almost every reactionary political position as part of this indictment, from social elitism and belief in the gender division of labour through to imperialism. Thompson similarly states that postmodernism ‘delights in stigmatising [the Enlightenment] as the source of all or most modern horrors and intellectual errors’ (p. 110). Given that postmodernist philosophers such as Foucault have explicitly stated that the Enlightenment is *not* to be dismissed in this way (‘we must free ourselves from the intellectual blackmail of ‘being for or against the Enlightenment’’ (Foucault, 1984: p. 45)), what are we to make of this indictment?

In passing we can note – as Thompson also does – that it is not an argument peculiar to postmodernism. Adorno and Horkheimer’s modernist *Dialectic of Enlightenment* saw an even straighter road from the *philosophes* to the gas chamber than do most postmodernists. Indeed, as discussed in the previous section, philosophical postmodernism questions such linear interpretations of the causal relation between political positions and epistemological principles. Politics cannot be reduced to a philosophical ‘moment’. Furthermore, philosophical postmodernism

recognises that to set up a simplistic opposition between 'bad' Enlightenment values and 'good' postmodern ones is to settle back into the fixed concepts and oppositions that it is seeking to undo. Taking the Enlightenment to be a stable body of concepts with particular moral values attached to them misrepresents the Enlightenment, even from a non-postmodern perspective. As recent discussions have shown in relation to questions of gender, for example, the Enlightenment was much more ambiguous than simplistic postmodernist accounts of the justification of women's subordination allow (see, e.g., Johns' 'Reproducing Utopia' in Gordon, 2001). Mary Wollstonecraft's progressive stance on women's education is just as much a product of Enlightenment discourses of freedom and rationality as Rousseau's reactionary stance (see, e.g., Johnson, 2002). Similarly, simplistic postmodernist accounts often take issue with Enlightenment notions of 'progress' that supposedly assert the superiority of the present over the past. But notions of 'progress' don't have any necessary relation to a sense of current superiority. The most compelling (if still inescapably problematic) contemporary and modernist notions of progress are those relating to 'Human Development', measured by a combination of income, longevity and education. These indices show unambiguous, albeit uneven and far from universal 'progress', most strikingly amongst women. (UN Development Programme, 2004). In the name of what progressive principle should we abandon such 'post-Enlightenment' notions of progress?

It is, surely, one of the ironies of some postmodern approaches to history that they deploy such simplistic, unitary notions of 'the Enlightenment' which both modern historiography and postmodern philosophy have done so much to destroy. Philosophical postmodernism does not reject but works to open up 'Enlightenment' concepts such as reason, freedom, and progress. It does not say that those concepts are empty, useless, or bad, but rather shows that those concepts cannot have the foundational function within a fixed system of concepts that they have long been assumed to have. Foucault, for instance (who is rightly positioned as a key figure in both these texts) wants to show that teleological progress cannot be foundational for history, but that a sense of progress out of political oppression can and must be retained. The complexity of this position, and the seeming problem of retaining 'foundational' concepts that originate in Enlightenment thought is what makes the relation between postmodernism and the Enlightenment so interesting. Indeed, the key Enlightenment method of *critique* – gaining understanding of a concept through an investigation into its conditions of possibility – is the common root linking Enlightenment thinkers such as Wollstonecraft and Kant with modern and postmodern ones such as Nietzsche, Adorno and Foucault. As Foucault makes clear in 'What is Enlightenment?', we have to understand the historical limits of the Enlightenment, while recognising it as inescapably constituting where we start from.

There is direct evidence of this dynamic in Brown's central claim that while postmodernism is critical of empiricism as a philosophy of knowledge, it is compatible with empiricist historical method. Brown makes the case effectively,

against the impending charge of relativism, that adopting a postmodernist way of thinking about the past need not involve a rejection of 'older' empiricist methods for finding out about events of the past. But surely the connection between empiricist methods and Enlightenment empiricism reveals something interesting about postmodernism: that it both critiques and makes use of concepts from the Enlightenment in productive ways. Unfortunately, neither Brown nor Thompson engages with the richness of this problem, which should be of central interest to historiography. Brown and Thompson both, in common with many postmodernists, are too quick to reject the Enlightenment as the immoral 'other' of postmodernism, and thus miss a chance to think critically about the problems of casting a historical body of thought in this light, and about the debt that postmodernist thinkers bear to the thinking of the past.

### 3. Modernity, Postmodernity, and Reality

The third metanarrative concerns *postmodernity*. Brown defines this as 'the intellectual, social and moral condition that superseded modernity at some point in the twentieth century (probably in the 1960s). It is characterised by a rejection and subversion of some of the key intellectual, social and moral principles of Enlightenment modernity' (p. 8) Thompson defines it more startlingly as 'an alleged basic shift in social and cultural reality occurring from the latter part of the twentieth century' (p. 133). Clearly, then the notion of postmodernity as a historical epoch plays off a notion of a preceding modern period based on Enlightenment principles. Some of the problems of this should be evident from the previous discussion. The notions of modernity/postmodernity treat historical epochs as emanations of intellectual shifts. This may be seen as open to the withering criticism of the 'expressive totality' which Louis Althusser divined in the early Marx. In such totalities, every feature of society can be analysed as the expression of an inner societal principle, and one in which these 'expressions' constitute the conditions of existence of the totality. This seems a close parallel to notions of 'modernity' and postmodernity in which certain intellectual principles both act as conditions of existence of, and emanations from, a principle. Again, critical discussion of the problems of postmodernist thinkers (including Foucault, with his famous 'epistemes') failing fully to escape the concept of historical epochs, especially in determining 'postmodernity' as such an epoch, would have been valuable. Where Thompson does discuss this, his preoccupation with Foucault's admiration for Freud and Deleuze and inadequate treatment of the French Revolution gets in the way of critical engagement (pp. 77–82).

Postmodernity, it seems, is characterised by both authors as emanating from a rejection of a notion of 'reality' that modernism holds dear. It is around the concept of 'reality' and its purported rejection that much of the criticism of postmodernism has centred. Thompson, here, is decidedly on the offensive, claiming that postmodernism 'denies the validity of the concept' of reality (p. 134) and seeks to



demonstrate that it is primarily linguistic (p. 120) and thus has no moral or epistemological foundation on which to rest its claims. On a related point, he suggests that the shift of focus from reality to discourse in postmodernist texts reveals its failings in the meaninglessness of their wilfully obscure prose. Thompson is, of course, wrong on all these points. Postmodernism does not deny the existence of reality. Like nearly all good philosophy, postmodernism finds traditional accounts of reality to be wanting and therefore poses anew the question of what reality is. The fact that it cannot come up with a stable and fixed answer to that question is not evidence of its vacuity, but rather evidence that reality cannot be constituted in thought as a stable identity. Far from denying the existence of reality, postmodernist philosophers are utterly intoxicated with it (see Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, two detailed studies of the nature of concrete reality). As to Thompson's assertion that difficult texts must be meaningless, philosophers like Derrida, Lyotard and Deleuze (in common with Kant, Hegel, Wittgenstein, and many others) have difficult and new ideas to express, often about the nature of language itself. Derrida's use of 'playful' forms of writing in deconstruction, for instance, is not evidence of intellectual laziness, but rather of the utmost rigour in the analysis of texts and their metaphysical background (see Williams, p. 28).

Brown is far more accurate than Thompson when it comes to discussing 'reality' in postmodernism, but the problems in his own account centre on his ascription of moral positions to modernity and postmodernity. As the previous quote shows, Brown sees the Enlightenment as having a characteristic morality, and postmodernity likewise. But these principles remain extraordinarily general and under-specified, especially notions of 'equality' (p. 155) about which, of course, rivers of ink have been used up without turning the idea into a simple principle of morality in the way notions of a 'postmodernity' founded upon it would seem to require. The link between postmodernity and a 'humanistic desire for personal freedom' (p. 150) similarly remains undefined or discussed. Underlying this is perhaps the problem that an epistemological principle of 'uncertainty' (p. 149) cannot logically be the basis of an overarching morality. A chapter is devoted to morality, but seems to be predicated upon the idea that the Enlightenment and modernity presupposed that morality could be derived from historical experience. Against this, Brown claims that postmodernism 'argues that morality is divorced from empiricism. It argues that there can be no logical recourse to the past as an empirical resource by which to justify a moral position' (p. 144). But the object of this polemic is obscure; nowhere are we told who has claimed that morality could be derived from empiricism, which would surely be a strange position for even the most benighted modernist. In any case, Brown's suggestion that postmodernism itself has 'a moral task' (p. 153) based on relative values and individual choice is misleading. It bears repeating that no philosophical postmodernist would claim that a fixed moral system or concept of the free subject could be foundational for thought or action, let alone for a historical epoch.

### Conclusion

Both Brown's and Thompson's books have their merits in introducing and assessing the impact of postmodernism in history. But in using an oversimplified sketch of postmodernism, the authors have cheated themselves and their readers of critical engagement with the ideas and problems of this complex movement. Postmodernism cannot be distilled to a series of methods to be applied without losing what makes postmodernism distinctive and worthwhile. That Brown does treat postmodernism as a set of methods leads to uncertainty about the intended audience of his book. Despite being aimed at students, it is not clear that this book would convince any student not already sympathetic to postmodernism to adopt the methods it advocates. This is because Brown offers no argument as to why postmodernist methods ought to be applied in history, beyond the problematic claim that there is a linear relation between postmodern epistemology and progressive politics. In contrasting modernist and postmodernist history, Brown suggests that 'the sense of righteous mission in European written History started to wither in the mid-twentieth century' (p. 150). Be that as it may, the meta-narratives of this book convey a sense of 'righteous mission' which moves from certain important and interesting epistemological principles to a 'world view' which conflates such principles with both political positions and the characterisation of historical epochs. This seems unhelpful.

To the initiated, however, Brown's book can serve as a useful reference point for background, terminology, and guidance on historical projects. Brown's endorsement of the methods he describes – evident in his own historical work – is never hidden, and his enthusiasm for his subject shines from every page. The advice offered in each chapter from an experienced practitioner for 'postmodernist' research projects is practical, balanced, and realistic, and encourages students to see their work in the context of an emerging body of such work. Students and researchers open to postmodernist ideas and methods will find much of value in Brown's book.

The same cannot be said of Thompson's book. Thompson is evidently opposed to postmodernism; it might appear that he is also inimical to philosophical thinking generally, as evinced both by his seeming unwillingness to work out the arguments in complex philosophical texts and by his inability to offer any argument against them beyond snide remarks about their difficulty. Commenting upon the obscurity of random passages from *Of Grammatology*, as Thompson does in his first chapter, is no way to argue that Jacques Derrida is wrong or that his approach is misguided. In place of argument, Thompson offers invective against the complexity, difficulty, and 'jargon' of poststructuralist thinkers. In common with Sokal and Bricmont – the physicists who 'demolished' the 'pretensions' of postmodernism and who Thompson treats as high authorities (p. 78) – Thompson takes his inability to understand poststructuralist texts at first glance to be evidence of their emptiness. The absurdity and the arrogance of such an attitude should be

evidence enough that this book is not to be taken seriously. Any reader taken in either by Thompson's antagonism or by his adherence to Marxist social history should keep in mind the Leninist dictum that in argument, as opposed to warfare, one should focus on the enemies' strongest points, not their weakest ones. Thompson neither recognises nor addresses any of the strong points of the philosophies he takes on; no student should be introduced to an intellectual movement through the hostility and bad argument this book exhibits.

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### Willie Thompson's Response

I have to thank the editor and book review editor for inviting me to respond to Beth Lord and Jim Tomlinson's review of Callum Brown's volume and my own. Some important points are raised by the review, as well as a number of red herrings dragged across the discussion. Much of the review is worth engaging with, even on the basis of vehement disagreement, but when the authors come to sum up then the sting – no doubt appropriately – is in the tail of the closing paragraph, where Lord and Tomlinson turn quite venomous in their valuation of my own volume. I will deal with this first, before addressing their more measured arguments.

I do indeed have a high estimate of Sokal and Bricmont's text. It is a pity that the reviewers distort it so crudely with their sarcastic apothegm, 'the physicists who 'demolished' the 'pretensions' of postmodernism'. Sokal and Bricmont emphatically do *not* set out to refute postmodernism as such – they themselves insist on that point, and for precisely that reason Derrida and Foucault are specifically excluded from their critique because these two, whatever their other demerits, did not themselves indulge in the grotesque charlatanism of a number of other eminent postmodernist authors abusing concepts drawn from physics, mathematics and other 'hard' sciences; instances of 'intellectual laziness', as Lord and Tomlinson put it, at its very worst. The celebrated Sokal parody, published in unthinking seriousness by a renowned postmodernist journal, exposed all too vividly the limitations of the postmodernist intellectual milieu.

I certainly would not accept, indeed I would forcefully challenge, their con-