

# Political Philosophy and Public Purpose

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Thomas de Zengotita

# Postmodern Theory and Progressive Politics

Toward a New Humanism

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*“Philosophy is an age grasped in thought.”*  
—Hegel

## SERIES EDITOR'S FOREWORD

Postmodernism—the term is still resonant with controversy so many years after its faddish academicism has faded. But has it? One of the key aspects of contemporary intellectual life, politics, and culture is a decisive breakdown of the structures of shared meaning that allowed for the coherence of a democratic humanism. A new, even shallower politics of identity, a skepticism toward rationalism, ideas about a “flexible self” and social constructivism, no less than a renewed expressivism in politics and a puerile politicization of culture, are just a few of the enfeebled children spawned by postmodernism’s assault on Western humanism and reason. The basis of much of what constituted the progressive social movements from the Enlightenment through the 1970s was rooted in values and principles of equality, self-expression, and non-domination. These were seen to be rational, human values: applicable to all and gradually to be extended to all human beings as members deserving respect, dignity, and self-development.

Postmodernism was a movement that saw the intellectual foundations for this grand movement of Western modernity as flawed and self-contradictory. For the postmodern view was rooted in a critique of rationality, in an alternative aestheticization of politics as well as an anti-universalism. It posited the inability of rational categories to serve as emancipatory; instead, they served to oppress. It posited difference in opposition to liberal or even social democratic forms of equality, since different cultures and identities were to be seen as having their own privileged positions and values. What resulted was a kind of free-for-all, where

humanities departments saw themselves immersed in a politics generated by hidden assumptions lurking in our philosophical and aesthetic concepts, no less than our everyday language.

All through the 1980s and 1990s academic scene, ideas such as these—as well as deconstruction, post-structuralism, and postcolonialism, to name only a few—wormed their way through humanities and social science departments. It was a climate ripe for hyper-intellectual, abstract, and non-empirical ideas: social movements were waning, electoral politics turning more conservative, and a new era of cheap consumption and hyper-individualism was taking root. Postmodernism was the reflection of this pseudo-political terrain in theory and it gestured toward radicalism by seeking to undermine and overturn all that the traditions of Western rationalism held as central. The result was a wholesale crumbling of literary traditions, humanistic philosophical ideas, and values grounded in rationalism.

But, Thomas de Zengotita argues in this fascinating and daring book, we should perhaps see in the intellectual debris of postmodernism's aftermath the hope for a new humanism. For de Zengotita, the key issue is that a new form of universalism and humanism will now be possible because of the shredding efficiency of postmodern ideas. For now, we can actually hope to weave the different groups, identities, and voices together that postmodernism centrifugally forced into their own corners of experience and concern. Now, a humanistic synthesis can begin in earnest where there was once a pulling apart of different groups and identities. This new humanism would be cultivated by these differences, perhaps even be made more human as a result. Even more, de Zengotita claims it is necessary. For our world is continually fragmenting us, dividing us, mediating us. We are losing that coherence and integrity that can hold out for us the possibility for a universal humanism that—although he acknowledges its ideological aspects in legitimating forms of domination historically—remains our only hope for a rational, humane, and decent future.

This can also bring a sense of purpose and project back to the humanities, which de Zengotita rightly diagnoses as being in a state of severe crisis. The encroachment of politics into every crevice of the humanities has rendered the search for the new and the phenomenological experience of it inert. De Zengotita has produced an argument that will not fit nicely into the ideological boxes that give perverse shape to our intellectual and academic discourses. By acknowledging the necessity of postmodernism's acidic solvency on our power-encrusted ideas, we will now be able to build

a new and more textured humanism and study the human condition with more nuance, more sensitivity. Perhaps then we will be able to start anew, as he asks us to, and create a more humane, and more just cultural and political sensibility. And that, given the nature of our times, will be welcome indeed.

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Michael J. Thompson

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