Work, Wealth, and Postmodernism
Bradley Bowden

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The Intellectual Conflict at the Heart of Business Endeavour
Like many families in both the Old World and New, mine suffered grievously from the process of modernisation and industrialisation that commenced in the late eighteenth century. My maternal ancestors immigrated from Lough Swilly in County Donegal in the 1850s, driven to the seas by famine and English bailiffs. Although their point of departure was a stone’s throw from Rathmullan, where the Flight of the Earls in 1607 signified the end for Celtic Ireland, they were no earls. Arriving in Australia they could neither speak nor write the English language, the *lingua franca* of the modernising world. My paternal grandfather, Ernest (Ernie) Bowden, was raised in a nineteenth-century Derbyshire mill-town, being born at 1 Mill Street, Glossop to the son—as one would suspect from the salubrious address—of a mill-hand. Arriving in Australia he married into a family of German immigrant wheat farmers; a family whose ancestors were driven from southern Germany by poverty and war. Unlike my maternal ancestors, who gradually prospered as sugar farmers, Ernie was bankrupted by the global collapse in wheat prices during the Great Depression. Driven from the land at a tender age, my father suffered a period in prison for “jumping the rattlers” (trains) while in search of work, before eventually settling down to a life of truck-driving, union activism, and self-education in Brisbane: my native town. I myself worked as a merchant seafarer for a decade before progressing to university and doctoral studies. Most of my seafaring life was spend in the engine-room, where the asbestos and hazardous chemicals almost certainly caused the oesophageal cancer that nearly killed me in my early fifties.
If my family, like countless others, has suffered from modernity, we have also benefited immensely from its intellectual and material gifts. The opportunities presented and delivered were immensely superior to those that we would have enjoyed if—by some miracle—Red Hugh O’Neill and his liegemen had prevailed at the Battle of Kinsale in 1601, thereby preserving for my ancestors a traditional rural existence amid the green, windswept hills and deep, grey-blue loughs of Donegal. As with so many others, my family—across the generations—embraced the travails and opportunities of modernity. Always, work defined us. We never sneered at material prosperity. It was too hard fought. Each generation prospered more than the one before. The son of a truck-driver and the great-grandson of a British mill-hand, my daughter is a medical doctor specialising in cardiac radiology.

The rationale for this book is thus at one level personal. It seeks to defend what once needed no defence: the modern world with its universities, its immense wealth, and its deeply ingrained traditions of democracy and respect for individual rights. The foe that threatens it from within—postmodernism—is one that I, like many others, failed to take seriously until it became obvious that its adherents, and its beliefs, were winning the intellectual war both within the university system and without.

This book is written for the educated lay reader—most particularly those employed or studying within a business discipline—who feel bamboozled by postmodernism. In the past, the numerous studies that have sought to refute postmodernism have based their refutation on comparatively brief summaries of postmodernist positions, followed by lengthy enunciations as to why they believe postmodernists to be in error. Such approaches invariably leave those unenthused by postmodernism in a confused state when postmodernists begin talking about “the sign”, “signifiers”, “forms”, “logocentric”, and “phonocentric”. Left confused, and therefore mute, those suspicious of postmodernist tenets leave the field of battle to the foe, thereby allowing postmodernism further easy advances. The approach of this book is different, based on the belief that any defence

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of the modern world requires understanding of the Western intellectual traditions that underpin our world as well as the postmodernist heritage.

As postmodernism attacks the epistemological (theories of knowledge) and linguistic traditions of Western thought, we first need to understand the ideas that are being attacked. As postmodernism strikes at the foundational principles of the European Enlightenment—principles that provided the basis for modern science, the Industrial Revolution, and modern political democracies—we need to understand those Enlightenment principles. As postmodernism denies the legitimacy of economics—and the economically progressive role of management—we need to be able to articulate a defence of the core premises of economic and management thought. Accordingly, this book is—following the Introduction subsequent to this Preface—structured in three parts. Part I—covering Chaps. 2, 3 and 4—deals with the intellectual heritage of postmodernism, and more significantly, the Western intellectual tradition that can be traced back through the European Enlightenment to Plato, Aristotle, and the ancient Greeks. Although postmodernists attack this Western intellectual tradition as being “ethnocentric”, the roots of postmodernist thought are also found within this tradition. In part, postmodernism draws on traditions of philosophic idealism that emerged during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; idealist traditions associated with George Berkeley, Giambattista Vico, and, above all, Friedrich Nietzsche. Postmodernism also draws on dissident traditions opposed to the post-1700 focus on industrial progress and material wealth; traditions associated with the French political philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the nineteenth-century Romantic Movement. If we are to understand postmodernism, we must therefore first comprehend its intellectual roots. Having traced in Part I the divergent traditions within Western thought—some giving rise to understandings upon which the modern world was built and others informing postmodernism—Part II explores the various strands within postmodernism: poststructuralism, Foucauldian postmodernism, Bruno Latour’s amodernism. As with the preceding section, Part II comprises three chapters. Chapter 5 explores the debates—most particularly regarding language, linguistics, and “structuralism”—that were seminal to the emergence of the various strands of postmodernist thought in France during the 1950s and 1960s. Chapters 6 and 7 deal with the main canons of postmodernist thought and how these have been taken up and applied in the various business disciplines. In Part III we examine both the sociological and economic transformations that help explain the extraordinary
intellectual success of postmodernism, before proposing our own formulae for improving our understandings of the world around us.

Before proceeding, our understanding of “modernity” is best explained. When this book uses the term “modernity”, it is referring to the societal model that emerged in Western Europe and North America during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; a societal model based on market economies, political democracy, the legal protection of private property and individual rights, and labour forces able to choose whether they wished to be employed by a particular employer or not. This is the societal model that this author wishes to defend; and which is being intellectually undermined by postmodernism. By this reckoning, Britain, France, the United States, and Japan are considered “modern”, whereas others—China, North Korea—are not. Some might take umbrage at this definition. However, the history of the twentieth century suggests that societies that deny their citizens basic rights and protections have a poor survival record. Certainly, China is a society that currently shows scant regard for democracy and individual rights. At the time of writing (November 2017), tens of thousands of migrant workers—referred to by Chinese officialdom as “low-end population”—were being evicted from their homes in Beijing, cast into the biting cold of a Chinese winter.² At the same time the Chinese Communist Party announced the purging of three generals from the People’s Liberation Army’s 11-person Central Military Commission, the unfortunates being either imprisoned or forced into suicide.³ All-powerful one day, under summary arrest the next, the fate of these military leaders bears striking resemblance to that which befell Stalin’s Soviet generals in 1938. Such societies are no heirs to the intellectual traditions of Thucydides, Thomas Hobbes, Adam Smith, or John Maynard Keynes.

In writing this book the author has, as much as the nature of the material allows, tried to avoid jargon and complexity. Each chapter is written as a self-contained entity, with referencing beginning afresh. This allows the reader the option of perusing the book from start to finish or, alternatively, picking and choosing their own order.

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This book owes a great debt to my colleagues in the Management History Division (MHD) of the Academy of Management, where I had the privilege of serving as an Executive Member between 2013 and 2018. It was through the Division and its debates that I not only extended my own knowledge, but also became increasingly aware of the nature of the postmodernist challenge. Among my MHD colleagues I would like to extend a special thanks to Art Bedeian and Jeff Muldoon for reading the manuscript and for their constructive criticisms. I would also like to thank Bernard Mees of RMIT University in Melbourne for his comments on the early drafts as well as my partner, Peta Stevenson-Clarke, for both reading the texts and for her support and encouragement. I would also like to pay a special thanks to Marcus Ballenger from Palgrave Macmillan in New York for bringing this project to fruition. Since our initial conversations in Anaheim in August 2016, Marcus has provided constant advice, input, and encouragement.
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ABBREVIATIONS

ASME  American Society of Mechanical Engineers
GDP   Gross Domestic Product
HRM   Human Resource Management
ILO   International Labour Organisation
IMF   International Monetary Fund
LSE   London School of Economics
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