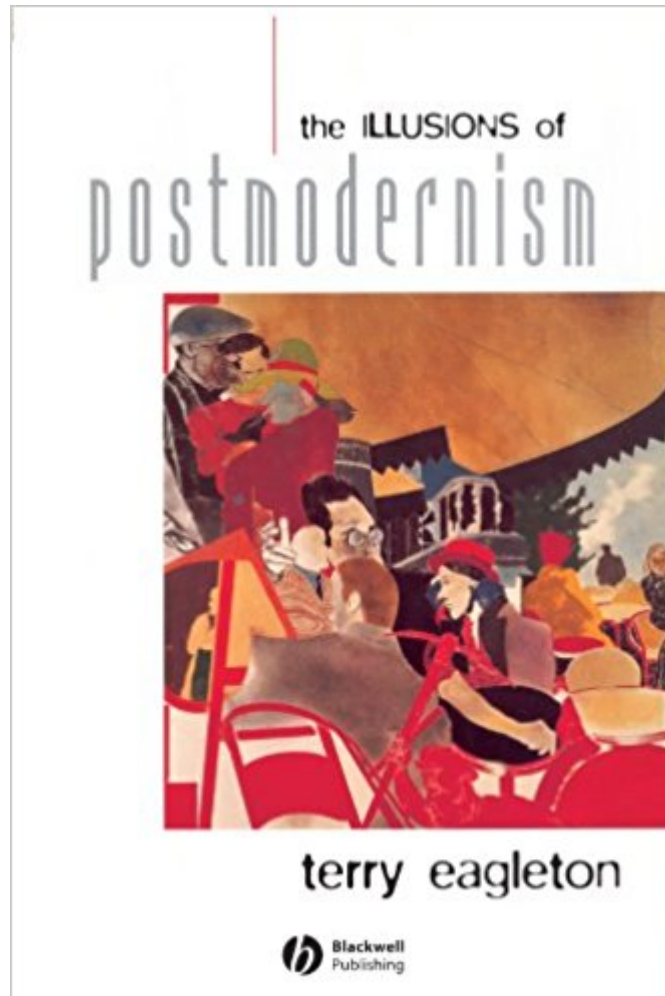




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The Illusions Of Postmodernism



Synopsis

In this brilliant critique, Terry Eagleton explores the origins and emergence of postmodernism, revealing its ambivalences and contradictions. Above all he speaks to a particular kind of student, or consumer, of popular "brands" of postmodern thought.

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Customer Reviews

Let me begin by confessing a bias--I positively love Terry Eagleton as a critic and writer. His _Intro to Literary Theory_ is amazingly lucid and influenced me a great deal. I was first exposed to PoMo while working on an MA in German Studies @ Rice University. It was a subject I had never before confronted in my undergrad years. I walked into my first Intro to PoMo class a naive optimist and humanist and naive believer in the Enlightenment tradition. Needless to say I was thrown for a heavy loop...PoMo utterly overwhelmed me, scrambled my brains, and in no small measure derailed my MA thesis for at least a year, trying to wrap my mind around this difficult subject. I felt a gut-level dislike of J.F. Lyotard and an immediate affinity for J. Habermas. Among PoMo writers, I felt most attracted to F. Jameson, who, of whom, of course, we got the least coverage in my class. In many ways, Eagleton picks up where Jameson leaves off. Both are conscientious Marxist theorists who offer a welcome critique of PoMo from a Leftist perspective that I can embrace as opposed to the usual gamut of Right-Wing/Conservative PoMo bashing ala Alan Bloom, et. al. that I only partially can stomach and tends to leave me cold. In defense of PoMo's positive aspects, I highly recommend the writings of US Professors Michael Berube and Cary Nelson. But Eagleton is a

mint...a unabashed socialist from Britain, a true cultural heir of Orwell, I think...He and fellow Briton Christopher Norris both offer solid, fair critiques of PoMo free of Rightist blather. Eagleton gives the best of PoMo its due, but also takes it to task time and time again, often quite humorously with intellectual irony.

In his attempt to find a working definition, Eagleton makes a distinction between postmodernism and postmodernity. For him, postmodernism is a style of culture reflecting something of the epochal changes during the historical phase of postmodernity. He explores the culture and milieu of postmodernist philosophy as a whole and does not much discuss particular works of art or specific theorists. Eagleton's approach is to look at what a student today might believe about postmodernism and to prove that most of that is false. Although his view is mainly negative, he judges both postmodernism's strengths and its failures from a broadly socialist political and theoretical perspective. The book draws extensively on the author's writings in the *London Review Of Books*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *Monthly Review*, *Textual Practice* and *Socialist Register* and is divided into the chapters *Beginnings*, *Ambivalences*, *Histories*, *Subjects*, *Fallacies* and *Contradictions*. Eagleton's sense of irony and gift of satire ensure an engaging text, especially when he comes up with turns of phrase like: " ... from Lyotard to leotards ...". He also touches on subjects as disparate as Madonna, graphic novels and gothic architecture, which enliven the text. Eagleton considers the politics of postmodernism to have been both enrichment and evasion. For all its supposed openness, Pomo can be just as censorious and exclusivist as the orthodoxies it opposes. He explains that it is a type of orthodox heterodoxy that needs its straw men in order to stay in business.

This is not a scholarly work (few footnotes), but it does make scholarly demands. The reader needs to know a lot about postmodernism and Marxism before picking it up, because Eagleton doesn't fill in the background. In short, the book does not serve as a primer. Still, pomo is a big subject and this is a slender volume, so a lot gets left out. Individual thinkers like Derrida, Kristeva, Lyotard and the usual suspects, are replaced by a popular view or what Eagleton calls the "sensibility of postmodernism as a whole." (p.viii). This amounts to a corporate image, a synthesis of the movement as a whole -- but is the synthesis really a straw man, a travesty of the real thing? On that, the reader will have to judge for herself; in any case fidelity to the originators is really not the point. Eagleton is not interested in what these thinkers precisely think or say. Instead, he's interested in what people believe pomo says, and just as importantly, in the kind of society that popularizes a

pomo sensibility. His aim, therefore, is more about society and politics than which thinker said what and when. This is consistent with his Marxism, which is not much interested in where an idea comes from, but instead how it affects where society is going. But, given the eclipse of international socialism, who cares what Marx or socialists say. Even postmodernism, Marxism's quondam successor, celebrates the god of the free market; so who cares. Well, as Eagleton points out, capitalism triumphant is an exploitative mess that is not likely (not certainly) to get better; thus, there remains a clear need for principles embracing collective solutions to collective problems.

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