Introduction: Postmodernism and 9/11

Among the many reactions to the 11 September 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, one of the most unexpected and striking was a public discussion of postmodernism. In his 22 September *New York Times* column, for example, Edward Rothstein interpreted the World Trade Center attacks as a 'challenge' to postmodernists, arguing that 'This destruction seems to cry out for a transcendent ethical perspective.'[1] On 24 September, *Time* magazine proclaimed 'the end of the age of irony', with Roger Rosenblatt asking combatively: 'Are you looking for something to take seriously? Begin with evil.' Despite the devastation, Rosenblatt suggested, 'one good thing' would come out of 9/11: postmodernists would no longer be able to say that 'nothing was real'.[2] Similar views were expressed in academia. Conservative academic Andrew Busch argued that 'postmodernism has run smack dab into original sin, and original sin has won'; while Kenneth Westhues recalled telling his sociology undergraduates after 9/11: 'Hey, students, there is a real world. It's not all social construction….It's not a matter of point of view. It's a fact.'[3] Finally, said these commentators, here was an event so undeniably real and shockingly immoral that it would make a disengaged, ironic attitude untenable, and would instead prompt people to reaffirm traditional notions of right and wrong.

Of course, the declaration of the end of the age of irony was premature. Before the month was out, *US News and World Report* editor John Leo was complaining that the reaction to 9/11 on university campuses was characterised by 'radical cultural relativism, non-judgmentalism, and a post-modern conviction that there are no moral norms or truths worth defending – all knowledge and morality are constructions built

by the powerful.'[4] A November 2001 report compiled by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni on responses to 9/11 in US universities claimed to have found evidence that 'professors across the country sponsored teach-ins that typically ranged from moral equivocation to explicit condemnations of America' (Martin and Neal 2001: 1). By the first anniversary of the attacks, Charles Kesler conceded in the conservative *National Review*: 'September 11 was a deathblow to postmodernism, we are often told. I wish this were true.'[5]

Indeed, some observers argued that far from signalling the end of postmodernity 9/11 epitomised it. Christine Nicholls, for example, offered 'a reading of September 11 2001 as the first world crisis expressing postmodernity'. Noting that the attacks were evocative of 'the most spectacular of the Hollywood disaster movies', she suggested that:

> the main external referent for September 11 2001, at least as visual spectacle, seemed not to be 'the real' or 'reality' but the movies, specifically Hollywood movies. In a bizarre inversion of what is supposed to be the norm, *simulacra* of reality, at least in some respects, became the major referent for the real in this case.
>
> (Nicholls 2004)

Rather than marking a return to the real, the spectacular destruction, captured live on TV and continually replayed, looked more like fiction. The point was inspired by Slavoj Žižek's argument that 9/11 seemed irreconcilable with our normal expectations

of reality. Taking his cue from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, Žižek suggested that in the West:

> the virtualisation of our lives, the experience that we are living more and more in an artificially constructed universe, gives rise to an irresistible urge to 'return to the Real', to regain firm ground in some 'real reality'.

This urge appeared to animate both the terrorist act and the conservative reaction to it. Yet the intrusion of a catastrophic event did not have the effect of jolting us out of our virtual stasis. Instead, it seemed so incompatible that we could only comprehend it as unreal:

> precisely because it is real, that is, on account of its traumatic/excessive character, we are unable to integrate it into (what we experience as) our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition.
>
> (Žižek 2002: 19)

Rather than shattering the image with a brutal 'return to the Real', argued Žižek, it would be more accurate to say that something which had formerly existed only as a screen image intruded into our 'reality' (2002: 16).

The implication of Žižek's argument was that the US had imagined its own destruction, even fantasised about it:

> poor people around the world dream about becoming Americans – so what do the well-to-do Americans, immobilized in their well-being, dream about? About a global catastrophe that would shatter their lives.
>
> (Žižek 2002: 17)

Hence the parallels with disaster movies: 'the September 11 attacks were the stuff of popular fantasies long before they actually took place' (2002: 17). So much so, indeed, that a number of popular cultural products were hastily withdrawn or postponed because of their close resemblance to the actual events, such as an album cover depicting hip-hop musicians The Coup blowing up the World Trade Center, and *Collateral Damage*, a film starring Arnold Schwarzenegger as a fire-fighter whose family is killed by a terrorist bomb.[6]

Somewhat similar points were made by the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard: although Žižek attributed the title of his collection of essays on 9/11 – 'Welcome to the Desert of the Real' – to *The Matrix* (Žižek 2002: 15), the line from the film was itself famously a quotation from Baudrillard's 1981 book *Simulacra and Simulations*. Writing about September 11, Baudrillard also noted the resemblance to 'countless disaster movies'. He too suggested that 'we have dreamt of this event', arguing that 'they *did it*, but we *wished for* it' (Baudrillard 2002: 5—7). Contemplating the unexpectedly total collapse of the Twin Towers, Baudrillard took it as a symbol of the West's collusion in its own destruction:

> The symbolic collapse of a whole system came about by an unpredictable complicity, as though the towers, by collapsing on their own, by committing

> suicide, had joined in to round off the event. In a sense, the entire system, by its internal fragility, lent the initial action a helping hand.
>
> (Baudrillard 2002: 8)

Such arguments did not go down well among American conservatives concerned to restore a sense of moral certainty, and no doubt the suggestion that the towers had symbolically 'committed suicide' was calculated to *épater les bourgeoises*.[7] Yet Baudrillard's audacious metaphor highlighted the way that 9/11 brought to the surface the West's own internal conflict, vulnerability and self-doubt. The very fact that conservative commentators seized on the attack as an opportunity to vent their frustrations at postmodernist relativism was a sign of their own ideological insecurities.

'Who would have thought, in those first few minutes, hours, days, that what we now call 9/11 was to become an event in the Culture Wars?', asked literary critic Stanley Fish in *Harper's Magazine*, coming to postmodernism's defence after September 11.[8] Yet that is precisely what it did become: another issue through which conservatives attempted to cohere society around a common set of patriotic, moral values. In the Culture Wars – launched by the political Right against the perceived legacy of the 'anything goes' culture of the '60s – conservatives have often seemed to be winning. The 1980s saw the promotion of an aggressively pro-capitalist ideology under the governments of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan and the decade culminated in the ending of the Cold War, appearing to signal an epochal victory: the 'end of history' as Francis Fukuyama (1989) famously put it. After the interlude of President Bill Clinton's two terms of office in the 1990s, the election of George W. Bush in

2000 was widely understood as a further resurgence of neo-conservatism. Yet, as the reaction to 9/11 suggested, conservatives were still on the defensive ideologically, seeing allegedly unpatriotic college professors and postmodern ironists as a threat to the American way of life. In arguing that 'The West…has become suicidal, and declared war on itself', Baudrillard (2002: 7) pointed up the lack of unifying values in Western societies. In the absence of any confident vision of the future, 9/11 further intensified an already heightened sense of vulnerability and fear. In Baudrillard's terms, the attack could indeed be said to have revealed the 'internal fragility' of the system.

Baudrillard had made similar points ten years earlier, writing about the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Then too, the argument was provocatively overstated: Baudrillard notoriously predicted that the war 'would not take place'; asked, once it had started, if it was 'really' taking place; and maintained afterwards that it 'did not take place'. At the time, he was widely dismissed as irrelevant. Even some critics who were sympathetic to post-structuralist thought derided Baudrillard's Gulf War commentaries as rarefied nonsense (Norris 1992). Yet his essays did seem to capture the inauthenticity of the high-tech, TV war; the feeling that it was somehow fake. A decade later, the notion of 'postmodern war' had become mainstream. In the wake of 9/11, commentators across the political spectrum discussed the War on Terrorism as a 'postmodern' phenomenon. Left-wing academic Douglas Kellner saw the October 2001 bombing of Afghanistan as 'a new step toward postmodern war'; while in the *National Review* Victor Davis Hanson complained that, with the 2003 invasion of Iraq, war had 'become fully postmodern'; and in the Pakistani newspaper *Dawn* Anis Shivani condemned 'America's hyperreal war on terrorism', describing it as 'an

intended replay of the cold war with a new postmodern gloss.'[9] What was formerly seen as an esoteric cultural theory had moved from the margins of academia to the mainstream of public debate.

Postmodernism and Postmodernity

'Postmodern' is of course a notoriously slippery term, used by different writers to mean different things, and used sometimes to mean not very much. This book adopts Jean-François Lyotard's (1984: xxiv) definition of postmodernism as 'incredulity toward metanarratives'. That is to say, postmodernism is an attitude: one which rejects grand narratives purporting to explain historical reality. Such 'totalising' theories are rejected by postmodernists as mere language games: discursive constructions, or ways of looking at the world, with no objective validity. There is, in this perspective, no Truth about Reality, only contingent, local 'truths' about multiple, discursive 'realities'. Lyotard's definition implies exactly the ironic, sceptical attitude toward truth claims and toward political and moral values which so troubled conservatives in the reaction to 9/11. Yet, as Perry Anderson (1998: 29) notes, 'Just one "master narrative" lay at the origin of the term: Marxism.' In other words, Lyotard's incredulity was aimed, in the first instance, at the promise of liberation and freedom offered by the 'grand narrative' of Marxism. He attempted a critique of capitalism of sorts, but one which was directed primarily at the alternative to it:

> Reason is already in power in kapital. We do not want to destroy kapital because it is not rational, but because it is. Reason and power are one….socialism, it is

> now plain to all, is identical to kapitalism. All critique, far from surpassing, merely consolidates it.
>
> (Lyotard quoted in Anderson 1998: 27)

The modernity that we are supposed to be 'post' is that of the Enlightenment. It is the belief in progress through scientific knowledge and in humanity's history-making potential which is the object of scepticism. Where Marxism had claimed to be the Enlightenment's true heir, upholding values of reason, progress and emancipation as the bourgeois order could not, postmodernists rejected those values as inevitably compromised, as not worth defending, as complicit with power.

While, in its origins, postmodernism is the outlook of a minority of disillusioned French leftists, it also claims to describe an epoch ('postmodernity'), or a general state of the world ('the postmodern condition'), which provides the basis for this outlook. The apparent distinction here between subjective perceptions and objective changes out there in the world is deceptive, however. As Frank Webster (1995: 164) argues, both postmodernism, as an intellectual perspective, and postmodernity, as a general condition or era, are defined by '*a rejection of modernist ways of seeing*'. Although various events and developments are identified as ushering in the postmodern age – Webster (1995: 167) suggests 'Fascism, Communism, the Holocaust, super-sophisticated military technologies, Chernobyl, AIDS, an epidemic of heart disease, [and] environmentally-induced cancers' as a representative list – it is less the events themselves than the perception of them which is important.[10] Different writers have different items on their shopping-lists of phenomena to be associated with postmodernity, but whichever developments are held to justify it, the result is the same: postmodern scepticism. What 'postmodernity' really means is that the outlook

initially associated only with a few intellectuals has now become more generalised. This is not to say, of course, that everybody is familiar with the intricacies of academic theorising about postmodernism. But it is to suggest that today the ironic and sceptical postmodern attitude is widespread.

At the heart of the postmodernist perspective is a profound doubt about political agency, often summed up as the 'death of the subject'. The concept of the active and autonomous individual is seen by postmodernist thinkers as an illusion, a product of discourse. For Jacques Derrida, for example, the logical conclusion of structuralist linguistics, whereby meaning is understood to be produced by the system of signs rather than by the speaker, is that the subject is 'a "function" of language' (1982: 12). According to Michel Foucault's historical study of the French penal system, *Discipline and Punish*, 'it is not that…the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it' (1991: 217). The implication is that the subject cannot challenge the rule of power and ideology since she is herself a product of it. Our very sense of ourselves as free and autonomous individuals is no more than an 'effect' of discourse. Language 'speaks us', rather than the other way round. The theoretical or historical terms in which this view is usually presented tend to mask its direct significance, but in reaching these conclusions postmodernists had a very specific subject in mind: the working class. For Marx, the working class was the collective 'universal subject', the potential active agent of historical change and progress. This was the subject who postmodernists pronounced dead.

Today the crisis of political agency is not just a theoretical proposition but a fact of everyday life. The world as described by the postmodernists, in which grand historical

projects are viewed with extreme scepticism and there is no apparent agency for effecting political and social change, would seem to have arrived. We have entered the twenty-first century with little vision of the future and less debate about what would constitute the good society than at any time since the French Revolution. The working class has ceased to exist as a political force, and the political sphere has become impossibly narrow as old ideologies appear discredited but no new ideas have replaced them. Scientific advances are commonly viewed with suspicion, economic and industrial development is widely condemned as a threat to the natural environment, and in place of the history-making subject stands the vulnerable individual, permanently 'at risk' and in need of protection.

If this state of affairs may be characterised as the postmodern condition, however, it does not prove that the postmodernists were right all along. What they theorised as the impossibility of historical agency was the political weakness of the Left. The postmodernists (and others) sought to provide a philosophical justification for this subjective political weakness or to endow it with the appearance of historical inevitability. Yet the main development which brought reality into line with their bleak prognosis was the Left's own long-drawn-out demise. In fact, if one wanted to identify a single historical event as signalling the emergence of postmodernity it would be the end of the Cold War. When Lyotard announced postmodernism's 'incredulity toward metanarratives' in 1979, he expressed a disenchantment that others shared: around the same time, André Gorz was bidding 'Farewell to the Working Class', for example, and Eric Hobsbawm was declaring the 'Forward March of Labour Halted' (Gorz 1982, Hobsbawm 1981). Yet even at that low point the Left was not entirely defeated, though it was weak enough for the Right to go on the offensive successfully throughout the 1980s. It was when the Berlin Wall came down at the end of the decade

that Margaret Thatcher's famous insistence that 'There Is No Alternative' to capitalism seemed to have been borne out by events.

There is, though, a twist in the tale. For the Left, of course the end of the Cold War delivered the *coup de grâce*, but perhaps surprisingly the result was not much better for the Right. Although attempts were made to suggest that Western governments had defeated the USSR through escalating the arms race and dragging the Soviets into a proxy war in Afghanistan, the West's 'victory' was accidental and unexpected, brought about more by the internal collapse of the decrepit Soviet system than by anything else. Having won by default, the Western elite found themselves wondering what to do next. It was as if they had been kept going only by having something against which to fight: so long as state socialism staggered on, the Right could appear dynamic and purposeful. Even as they celebrated their triumph, the more perceptive elite thinkers quickly realised that with nothing to define themselves against, their own underlying weakness would be exposed. Irving Kristol, for example, arch neo-conservative and the publisher of the magazine in which Fukuyama's 'end of history' article appeared, observed that 'our American democracy, though seemingly triumphant, is at risk':

> it is at risk precisely because it is the kind of democracy it is, with all the problematics – as distinct from mere problems – that fester within such a democracy. Among such problematics are the longing for community, for spirituality, a growing distrust of technology, the confusion of liberty with license, and many others besides.

> We may have won the Cold War, which is nice – it's more than nice, it's wonderful. But this means that now the enemy is us, not them.[11]

Kristol found it hard to work up much enthusiasm for the 'nice' historic victory because he knew it exposed the elite to scrutiny and he feared that the emperor had no clothes. His 'problematics' are a series of absences – of a strong shared identity, of clear common values, of a vision of progress, of agreed traditions and mores – which could no longer be disguised. With the ideology of anti-communism suddenly unavailable, awkward questions began to be asked about what exactly the West did stand for.

This, to return to where we started, is the reason for conservatives' continuing discomfort with postmodernism. When they get agitated about 'un-American' intellectuals, what conservative commentators are really railing against is their own inability to project a clear and inspiring cause. In reality, the *recherché* pursuits of academic postmodernists present little challenge. Responding to conservatives' fulminations against unpatriotic cultural relativists in US universities, for example, Stanley Fish resented what he saw as a contemporary equivalent of the red-baiting scares of the McCarthy era, but was at pains to show that he was not unpatriotic. Indeed, postmodernism might even make the War on Terrorism more effective, he suggested, by allowing greater understanding of the motives and goals of the enemy. We 'can and should invoke the particular lived values that unite us and inform the institutions we cherish and wish to defend', argued Fish, but we should do so 'without grasping for the empty rhetoric of universal absolutes' such as 'abstract notions of justice and truth'.[12] Fish's pragmatic acceptance of relativism, whereby 'there can be

no independent standard for determining which of many rival interpretations of an event is the true one', and no 'hope of justifying our response to the [9/11] attacks in universal terms', is fine for the seminar room, where it no doubt makes for lively, if inconclusive, discussions about any number of texts. It is of limited use to the political elite, however, since it presumes the presence of precisely that which is lacking: a society united around agreed values and institutions. The problem is that, far from exhibiting a fervent belief in common 'cherished' values, contemporary Western societies are characterised by a conspicuous lack of shared meanings. This is not to imply, of course, that the past was a golden age of social harmony and unity which has now ended. Rather, it is to suggest that the framework of Left and Right provided a common vocabulary with which to discuss and dispute how society could be taken forward. This is what is now absent.

This book is not written from a postmodernist perspective, and the terms 'postmodernism' and 'postmodernity' are used here in a way that some readers may find annoying. Those sympathetic to postmodernism may well object to the fact that the book takes a critical view of postmodernism while treating its terminology and concepts in a rather cavalier fashion. They will be disappointed to find little reference to jargon-laden academic debates, and may think it scandalous that various writers, ideas and events are nevertheless bandied about freely as examples of the postmodern in the pages that follow. Those unsympathetic to postmodernism, if you have got even this far, may feel on the contrary that postmodernist theory and the concept of postmodernity are given far too much credence and treated with excessive respect. It is accepted here as a premise that the contemporary period may usefully be characterised as 'postmodernity' along the lines suggested above, and it is suggested

that thinkers, such as Baudrillard, usually classified as postmodernists have something interesting to say about it. The aim is to take the postmodernist approach for what it is: an often illuminating description of contemporary realities, but one which allows only a limited critique. As an outlook of disillusionment, postmodernism accurately describes the uncertainty, relativism and lack of self-belief which characterises society today, but is unable to transcend it.

Globalisation, Risk and War

There are, of course, alternative ways of describing the present epoch, most influentially with the ideas of 'risk society' and 'globalisation'. Despite their obvious differences from the concept of 'postmodernity', in certain key respects these ideas are also similar – perhaps not surprisingly, since they are concerned with explaining the same developments. Look again, for example, at Webster's (1995: 167) list of events often seen as marking the onset of postmodernity, quoted above. Most of them are concerned with risk and 'manufactured uncertainty': 'super-sophisticated military technologies, Chernobyl, AIDS, an epidemic of heart disease, environmentally-induced cancers'. Anthony Giddens, who together with Ulrich Beck is the most influential exponent of the 'risk society' concept, argues that globalisation is related to the 'emergence of means of instantaneous global communications and mass transportation' and is 'really about the transformation of space and time' (Giddens 1994: 4—5), an explanation which is strikingly similar to David Harvey's (1989) argument that 'time-space compression' is the defining characteristic of 'the condition of postmodernity'. These are different ways of getting at the same thing. What makes

the idea of postmodernity a potentially more useful starting point for thinking about the present is that it foregrounds the problem of political agency: this, it is argued here, is the key change that needs to be investigated and explained. It has to be said that postmodernist thought does not offer an entirely straightforward route to addressing this issue, but both the origins of postmodernism and the important place it gives to the 'death of the subject' mean that one does not have to scratch very hard at its surface to see that what is at stake is a failure of political subjectivity.

In the concepts of globalisation and risk society, on the other hand, the problem of political agency is even more mystified. This is partly a problem of explanation, and partly a result of the prescriptive uses to which these concepts are put. In terms of explanation, both of these ideas suggest that unavoidable processes – of globalisation or of 'reflexive modernisation' – have made the old political frameworks of class and nation untenable. In a global economy, for example, governments are said to have only limited room for manoeuvre in terms of national economic and social policy, while global risks such as environmental damage seem to demand solutions which are not conceivable within the bounds of single nation-states. Moreover, the way that people are said to experience this new world also has a corrosive effect on former patterns of political and social identification. The process of 'reflexive modernisation', whereby society confronts its own unintended risks and side-effects, entails a breakdown of traditional forms of identification, such as in fixed class and gender roles, leading to greater individualisation; while globalisation, it is claimed, entails the growing self-awareness of new 'placeless', trans-national communities which develop in the increasingly dense networks of 'global civil society' (Beck 2000a: 12). Prescriptively, globalisation and the coming of 'risk society' are supposed

to have forced a new politics on to the agenda. The radical uncertainty of risk society both undercuts traditional political responses and relocates the political to this new ground of 'reflexive' debate over risk; globalisation both empties national politics of meaning and necessitates a new 'cosmopolitan' outlook.

On the one hand, then, change is objectified as the inevitable product of implacable forces beyond anyone's control. At the same time, the powerlessness of political actors who remain within the traditional Left-Right, nation-state framework is taken as the warrant for a new cosmopolitan politics. In this sense, the ideas of globalisation and risk society are attempts to explain the crisis of political agency. Yet they are also invoked in attempts to overcome the ideological vacuum Left by the end of the Cold War, including – and this is their main interest for this discussion – in attempts to do so through war and international intervention. Particularly since 9/11, a politics of fear has been used in just the way suggested by the theorists of 'risk society' – as a means of bringing people together through a new 'solidarity from anxiety' (Beck 1992: 29) – and war is now understood as a preventive measure to pre-empt possible risks and threats. Similarly, the cosmopolitan outlook of 'global civil society' has been invoked repeatedly by Western leaders as the rationale for new forms of 'humanitarian' and human-rights based intervention.

Sceptics of globalisation argue that in fact not much has changed and that this much-vaunted development is really just the capitalist world market discussed by Marx. Viewed from this perspective, the fear-mongering of neoconservatives, or the 'cosmopolitan' justifications for international armed intervention just look like the latest ideological excuses for the pursuit of business as usual. The barriers to capital

are broken down abroad as the borders of nation-states are either rendered irrelevant by trans-national economic activity or are crossed by Western armies, sent to intervene on 'human rights' grounds, who make the more unruly parts of the world stable enough for investment or resource-plundering. Meanwhile, at home the populace is kept in fear of the next terrorist attack, the better to neutralise opposition. Some such scenario is the traditional left-wing response, but it is an inadequate critique.

While cosmopolitanism does work as an ideological justification for intervention in weaker states, the sorts of military actions pursued by Western governments since the end of the Cold War have little or no direct relationship to the promotion of capitalist interests. Where was the self-interested advantage of intervention in Somalia or Kosovo, for example? Furthermore, with little opposition either at home or abroad, it is not obvious why Western governments should have sought to cloak their post-Cold War foreign interventions with the rhetoric of cosmopolitanism. In many instances – notably Bosnia and Rwanda – the West was criticised, both by liberals and leftists at home and by local actors, for *not intervening enough* rather than for projecting its power too aggressively. The problem with the traditional anti-imperialist critique is that it hugely overestimates the extent to which the Western elite are in control: they are themselves prone to the fear they promote, rather than coolly manipulating it for some hidden purpose; they are seeking a self-defining mission in the project of 'ethical', cosmopolitan interventionism, not simply using it instrumentally to conceal some darker, self-interested goal. The ideas of precautionary war and cosmopolitan interventionism, in other words, are attempts to give purpose and direction to Western

foreign policy: they are an expression of the elite's attempt to establish some new sense of mission for the post-Cold War era.

About this Book

This is the core argument of this book: that war and intervention since the Cold War have been driven by attempts on the part of Western leaders to recapture a sense of purpose and meaning, both for themselves and for their societies. This in turn has led to a heightened emphasis on image, spectacle and media presentation. Yet it is not really the media themselves that are the problem, even though some reporters and commentators have actively colluded in the process. Rather, it is the changing character of war which is at issue, and behind that, a fundamental shift in the politics of Western societies, summed up as the 'end of Left and Right'. For that reason, although the staging of war, and of acts of terrorism, as media events make it important to examine media coverage, the analysis developed here attempts to reach beyond a critique of the media to examine the events themselves and the broader political changes that give rise to them.

Chapter 1 examines the idea that the Western military and the wars they fight can be described as 'postmodern'. Through a re-reading of Baudrillard's essays on the 1991 Gulf conflict, it is argued that the distinctive features of contemporary warfare as waged by the West – particularly its emphasis on image and spectacle – derive from the fact that it is a response to what Zaki Laïdi (1998) calls the 'crisis of meaning' precipitated by the end of the Cold War. Critically assessing claims that some

Western states are now ‘postmodern’, it is argued that the hollowing out of the national political sphere has led to the use of international activism as a means of manufacturing a sense of shared ‘values’. At the same time, this attempt is undercut by the fact that the absence of meaning makes the conduct of war risk-averse and its media presentation self-conscious.

These tensions are explored further in Chapters 2 and 3. Chapter 2 examines the attempt to use ‘humanitarian intervention’ as a new source of common values, arguing that this gave rise to media distortions as Western journalists joined their leaders in a narcissistic search for meaning in the Balkans and elsewhere. Ultimately, it is suggested, the attempt was unsuccessful: the ersatz morality constructed around ‘ethical foreign policy’ could only evade, not overcome, the death of politics. The War on Terror is also assessed, in Chapter 3, as an ideological failure. The preoccupation with image and presentation reached new heights in the 2003 Iraq war, yet the effectiveness of the propaganda was undermined by the way that the news media self-consciously drew attention to its deliberately manufactured quality. The elite’s own image-conscious conduct of war was counter-productive, encouraging media cynicism.

Chapter 4 begins to uncover the roots of this crisis of grand narratives, locating the problem of meaning in Western societies. This chapter looks at the origins of postmodernism and at how it became influential among a Left which had grown disillusioned with universalism and humanism, become sceptical of any ‘grand narrative’, and effectively abandoned the goal of progress. Examining the post-Vietnam Culture Wars, however, it suggests that the elite had its own ‘postmodern

moment', and outlines the consequences of this stalemate for contemporary political life.

These consequences are explored in Chapters 5 and 6. Chapter 5 addresses the idea of 'risk society' in relation to war and domestic terror alerts. A heightened sense vulnerability and risk, it is argued, is more a symptom of the death of politics than a sign of some new politicisation. Discussing how theories of international relations have changed since the end of the Cold War, Chapter 6 examines what David Chandler (2006) calls the 'Other-directed ethics' of contemporary Western foreign policy. It is suggested that the elevation of individual conscience represents an inability or unwillingness to engage others in political debate, as evident in Western societies as it is in the phenomenon of 'postmodern terrorism'.

The Conclusion returns to the issue raised here of how far postmodernism represents a challenge to, rather than only a description of, contemporary society.

Notes to Introduction

[1] Edward Rothstein, 'Attacks on U.S. Challenge the Perspectives of Postmodern True Believers', *New York Times*, 22 September 2001, http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~dgalvan/intl240-f03/pomo&9-11-rothstein1.htm.

[2] Roger Rosenblatt, 'The Age of Irony Comes to an End', *Time*, 24 September 2001, www.time.com/time/covers/1101010924/esroger.html.

[3] Andrew E. Busch, 'September 11 and the Return to Reality', Editorial, John M. Ashbrook Center for Public Affairs, Ashland University, October 2001 (www.ashbrook.org/publicat/oped/busch/01/reality.html); Kenneth Westhues, 'Postmodernism, Political Correctness, and the Attacks of September 11', Panel presentation at the Tenth Anniversary Meeting of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship, University of Western Ontario, 4 May 2002 (http://arts.uwaterloo.ca/~kwesthue/postmodernism.htm).

[4] John Leo, 'Campus hand-wringing is not a pretty sight', *uexpress.com*, 30 September 2001, www.uexpress.com/johnleo/?uc_full_date=20010930.

[5] Charles R. Kesler, 'Our Fighting Faith: Why We Roll', *National Review*, 10 September 2002, www.nationalreview.com/script/printpage.asp?ref=/comment/comment-kesler091002.asp.

[6] For details of The Coup's *Party Music* and other controversial album covers see www.tabootunes.com/gallery.html. On the censorship of films and TV programmes see David Lister, 'How do you entertain when fantasy becomes horrible reality?', *The Independent*, 12 November 2001.

[7] Apparently with some success -- see, for example: Mark Goldblatt, 'French Toast', *National Review Online*, 13 December 2001, www.nationalreview.com/comment/comment-goldblatt121301.shtml.

[8] Stanley Fish, 'Postmodern warfare: the ignorance of our warrior intellectuals', *Harper's Magazine*, July 2002, www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m1111/1826_305/88998669/print.jhtml.

[9] Douglas Kellner, 'The Politics and Costs of Postmodern War in the Age of Bush II', undated but c. February 2002 (www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/papers/POMOwar.htm); Victor Davis Hanson, 'Postmodern War', *National Review Online*, 7 March 2003 (www.nationalreview.com/hanson/hanson030703.asp); Anis Shivani, 'America's hyperreal war on terrorism', *Dawn*, 5 November 2001 (www.dawn.com/2001/11/05/op.htm).

[10] This is why, as Krishan Kumar's (1995: 116—18) account suggests, when critics seek to characterise postmodernity in terms of 'objective' economic changes, as opposed to subjective perceptions of the world – as in Fredric Jameson's idea of 'late capitalism', Scott Lash's concept of 'disorganised capitalism' or David Harvey's notion of 'flexible accumulation' – the line between the two becomes blurred as these 'objective' changes are understood in terms of subjectivity and the centrality of culture.

[11] Available at www.wesjones.com/eoh_response.htm.

[12] Stanley Fish, 'Condemnation Without Absolutes', *New York Times*, 15 October 2001, http://humanities.psydeshow.org/political/fish-column.htm.