Questions about a postmodern psychology easily derail in disputes about whether there might or might not be something called "postmodernity" and therefore whether discussions based on that concept might not be a waste of time. Many such discussions appear to be in vain because of the failure to analyze the structuring function of the concept of postmodernity within a particular historical narrative. If we were to compose a personal history, for example, we might decide to divide our narrative into two periods separated by the centrally important event of marriage. Our biography would thus recognize a period “before the marriage” and one “after the marriage,” and most of the incidents we would describe would additionally carry the meaning of either “leading up to,” or “preparing for,” or “following” the marriage. In this case, as in all other stories similarly constructed, the narrative device of “before” and “after” serves the purpose of emphasizing what is thought to be a very important or “crucial” event that can be shown to shed a particularly revealing light on the sequence of happenings within the rest of the story. It should be understood that an event can become “crucial” or even “historical” only within the context of a particular historical narrative, and that it can be devalued or erased only within the context of an alternative historical account in which the events of an era are arranged and evaluated in a different and perhaps more revealing way.

Historical narrative creates a revealing ensemble which shows the relative importance of each event in respect to all others. Writing history is not composing a simulacrum of something that we might think of as real and as already invested with a true importance outside of any narrative context. Only historical narrative is capable of creating a historical subject and of endowing it with meaning.

To speak, therefore, of what is “premodern,” “modern,” or “postmodern” means no more than to propose the imposition of a rudimentary temporal structure on a narrative that takes Western intellectual or
cultural history as its subject. A historical narrative structured in this way must ultimately be judged upon its own merits.

MODERNITY: DISPLACED SEARCH FOR PRIOR RELIGIOUS UNITY

It is possible to understand the historical change from premodernity to modernity as a transposition of the idea of an all-pervasive unity from an essentially religious context to one essentially secular. Within the religious or premodern context, this central idea of unity referred to God the Father and to the celestial realm where his Word reigned supreme. Within the modern secular realm, this sacred idea of a unifying power became attached to a secular natural scientific reason, and the Christian promise of a Kingdom of Heaven was replaced by the secular dream of a physical universe made completely translucent by this same universal reason. The impossible, never-to-be-accomplished task of the modern social sciences was to find a place for human beings within this new secular universe.

The era of modernity and of secularity was dominated by an ever intensifying search for intellectual, political, and artistic unity and similarity. Unity was thought of as recoverable, beneath the confusing appearances of plurality and diversity, by means of a true scientific method. The secular search for unity became manifest in the constant striving for a unified scientific method of investigation that could be applied to all fields of inquiry, no matter how divergent their subject matter. Any deviation from the unification program and the standardization of intellectual inquiry met the same resistance that the introduction of a heretical faith would have met in the premodernist era. It was hoped that a unified method of inquiry might be found for the social sciences by strictly following the example of the natural sciences, and strenuous efforts were made to fit these sciences into the patterns of these other, alien, naturalist disciplines.

The recommended universal scientific method was itself in constant evolution and subject to many changes. But throughout this process there was a striving, first of all, for an absolute praxis, a way of working with materials and beings that differed sharply from anything done previously in shops or stables or on the fields, and that produced not crops or goods but a new kind of unified scientific knowledge. This new, unconsciously religious, absolute praxis required its own setting and eventually gave rise to the modern natural scientific laboratory. Moreover, it required the adoption of a universal and absolute language in which to interrogate the material universe and to record responses. Eventually, a system of non-spatial mathematics was developed that could serve this function. The language and the practice that define modernity could function only at a