

Post – Modernism Perspective in Humanities: A Critical Appraisal of its Relevance to Africa.

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Introduction

Postmodernism in its broad perspectives, rejects epistemological assumptions, refutes methodological conventions, resists knowledge claims, obscures all versions of truth and dismisses policy recommendation (Boyne and Rattansi 1990). According to Sarup (1993), it is the incipient or actual dissolution of those social forms associated with modernity. It should be noted that modernity veered into history as a progressive force with the promise to emancipate humankind from ignorance and irrationality. As such, modernity refers to the progressive economic and rationalization and differentiation of the social world (ibid). This is what has formed the core of knowledge, making basic assumptions and stressing processes that guide activities towards knowledge production that can be verifiable. Rosenau (1993) observes that proponents of postmodernism claim to relinquish all attempts to create new knowledge in a systematic fashion, but project an anti – rule fashion of discuss. This perspective being expounded by postmodernists have profound implication in humanities and social science scholarship especially in its contention that there are limits and limitations of modern reason that are inherent in the forms and types of reasoning and social analysis that has characterized society and the modern.

But does this perspective have any merit and most especially for us in the third world. This is the angle this study shall take and we hope at the end, we should have been able to render a critical appraisal of this approach in the broader Humanities disciplines. However, we shall start by discussing the emergence of postmodernism as an epistemological approach, the next section will be focusing on the epistemological stance of postmodernism, thereafter we examine postmodernism scholastic perspective in the Humanities. The next section looks at the implication of this view to knowledge and society, a focus on projecting a synthesis in knowledge production and the conclusion shall follow.

Origin of Postmodernism

Postmodernism as an epistemological attitude towards knowledge emerged as an area of academic study around the mid – 1980s (Klages 2003:1). The philosophic origin of this approach is traced to the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. Nietzsche(1979) in his work had attacked the philosophical conception of the subject, representation, causality, truth, value and systems, substituting them with a perspectives orientation for which there are no facts, only interpretations, and no objective truths but only constructs of various individuals or groups. To him, all language was metaphorical and the subject was only a product of language and thought (Best and Kellner 1991:22).

The political crisis in France in 1968 gave impetus to the gain made by postmodernist ideas. According to Best and Kellner (1991:23), it was through such struggles as waged by students and workers that spurred Michael Foucault and other postmodernists to intensify theorizing the intimate connection between power and knowledge and to see that power operates to saturate social and personal existence.

Actually, many French writers that developed the postmodern perspective in the 1960s through the 1980s started this venture at the time structuralist approach was dominant and influential (sociology 319, 2000). Here, within societal structures, individual identities are determined by economic factors or by political and ideological forces. The norm, collective representations, social class, ideology or social status position determine individual consciousness and action. In this approach, these structures are internalized by individuals, which in turn affect the way they think and thus play a major role in how individuals act and interact. These tended to be relatively fixed and unchangeable over time. This scientific pretension of structuralism was first attacked by post – structuralism writers, who had argued that structuralist theories did not fully break with humanism, since they reproduced the humanist notion of an unchanging human nature (Best and Kellner 1991:20).

Post – structuralism was actually in reaction to the abstraction of cultural data characteristic of model building. Cultural relativists have argued that model building hindered understanding of thought and action (Weiss and Wesley: 2003). The post –

structuralist rather than see structure as determinant rather regard consciousness, identity and signs as historically produced, as such are varying in different historical periods (ibid). Post – structuralist like Bourdieu posits that emphasis should be placed on reflexivity and the search for logical practice. By this accounts participant's behavior and meaning are not objectified by the observer. Post – structuralist writers laid emphasis in developing new theories of language and texts, while attacking many philosophical assumptions associated with modernity. They attacked the binary opposition that have formed the core of the debate following the emergence of post – structuralism, such as subject and object, appearance and reality, knowledge and social reality, questioning whether solid forms of knowledge and truth could be developed (ibid:21). In their view, this binary metaphysics, works to positively position reality over appearance, speech over writing, men over women or reason over nature, as such positioning negatively the supposedly inferior term. It was this foundation that sprouted postmodernist attack on conventional philosophic and social scientific approaches, thus developing a wide range of views that challenged the notion of progress, truth, reality and values (Sociology 319:2000).

There are variants of postmodernism and the writers adopt varying perspectives. However notable postmodernism scholars who have made profound contributions and some of whom ideas, we shall be discussing in this paper, include Michael Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Jean – Francois Lyotard. Rowland Barthes, Frederic Jameson, Jacques Derrida, Felix Guattari, Gilles Deleuze, Paul Virilio and Arthur Kroker among others have some point of convergence. Rosenau (1992: 168) notes that postmodernism approach originally came from the humanities where subjectivity and speculation are interesting and insightful. But the appeal of the approach is its attempt to break down barriers among discipline, time and traditions and attempt to analyze them segmentally. The result is valuable interdisciplinary and cross – cultural approaches, that questions the notion of human progress, and constitute a thoroughgoing attack on the legacy of the Enlightenment on positive sociology, historical progress, science and the scientific method of political struggles and social movements.

The concept of postmodernism has been employed with increasing frequency and intensity in criticism that relate to various medium as well as in philosophical discourse. Postmodernism, displays the confluence of discourse formation that take shape in different discipline (Hoesterey, 1991).

Epistemological Foundation of Postmodernism

Postmodernism as an attitude to knowledge constitute an attack against theory and methodology. It rejects epistemological assumption of modernism, refutes its methodological conventions, resists knowledge claims and obscures all versions of truth and dismisses policy recommendations (Rousenau 1991). Spiro (1996) posits that “the postmodernist critique of science consists of two interrelated arguments, epistemological and ideological both based on subjectivity. According to Spiro, this is because of the subjectivity of the human subject precludes the possibility of science discovering objective truth and secondly, since objectivity is an illusion, science according to the ideological argument, subverts oppressed groups, females, ethnics, third world peoples etc (ibid).

Rosenau contend that postmodernism is revolutionary in its formulation that dismisses the core of what constitute social science and humanities. It should be noted that modernity came into history as a progressive force with the promise to emancipate humankind from ignorance and irrationality. According to Flax (1990) they are ideas of enlightenment in Europe or humanism anchoring on the premises that:

1. There is a stable, coherent, knowable self. This self is conscious, rational autonomous and universal. No physical condition or difference substantially affect how this self – operates.
2. this self knows itself and the world through reason or rationality, posited as the highest form of mental functioning, and the only objective form
3. the mode of knowing produced by the objective rational self is ‘science’, which can provide universal truths about the world, regardless of the individual status of the knower
4. The knowledge produced by ‘science’ is truth and is eternal.
5. This knowledge/truth produced by science (by the rational objective knowing self) will always lead towards progress and

perfection. All human institution and practices can be analyzed by science (reason/objectivity) and improved.

6. Reason is the ultimate judge of what is good (what is logical and what is ethical). Freedom consists of obedience to the laws that conform to the knowledge discovered by reason.

7. in a world governed by reason, the true will always be the same as the good and the right; there can be no conflict between what is true and what is right

8. Science thus stands as the paradigm for any and all society useful forms of knowledge. Science is neutral and objective; scientist, those who produce scientific knowledge through their unbiased rational capacities, must be free to follow the laws of reason, and not motivated by other concerns.

9. Language or the mode of disseminating knowledge must be rational also. To be rational, language must be transparent; it must function only to represent the real/perceivable world which the rational mind observes. There must be a firm and objective connection between the objects of perception and the words used to name them (between the signifier and signified).

These are fundamental premises of modernism that serve to justify and explain all social structures and institutions. The believe that social theory is part of modernity. Thus it was the separation of society from nature that led to social theories that analyzed this process. The social theorists from enlightenment to the structuralist were generally committed to the idea that the modern represented progress, that reason could be used to develop knowledge and understand society, that social theory could be used to improve society and that knowledge and theory were somewhat universal in nature – able to contribute to an understanding of societies across history and around the globe.

However postmodernism writers argue that there are limits and limitations of modern reason (Bauman 1991:397) that are inherent in the forms and types of reasoning and social analyses that has characterized society and the modern. They challenge the view that this form of reason and rationality can be equated with progress in respect of “justice, virtue, equality, freedom and happiness”.

Even though postmodernism represents the coming together of elements from a number of different, often conflicting orientations (Rosenau 1991), the area of convergence is in the challenge of those fundamental premises of modernism.

Postmodernism share skepticism about the possibility of truth, reason and moral universe. For Lyotard, postmodern knowledge is opposed to met narratives (grand scheme of legitimation) and metaphysical philosophy, philosophies of history and any form of totalizing thought (1991:165). Consequently, Lyotard would consider Liberalism, Marxism, the rational forces of Max Weber and structural functional approaches to be inadequate or misleading explanations of the social world and unable to develop true knowledge of this world (ibid). This large scale theories or metanarratives tend to argue that they are universally applicable, with prescription for progress regardless of context. Again, these theories tend to exclude rather than include, favor consensus over dissent and similarity over diversity and difference.

For example, liberalism appears inclusive, but traditionally excludes many parts of society like those not part of the nation – state and adopts a specific view of citizenship that not all may accept. Theories such as those of Durkhem exclude and treat as deviant those who do not fall into the conventional norms. Marxism exclude by focusing on commodities, exchange and political activity. Science excludes magic, superstition, revelation and the spiritual in the name of certain knowledge and understanding.

A summary of the epistemological underpinning of postmodernism is revealed by Leicester(2000), who notes that postmodernism is not a systematic theory or unified movement so much as a loose umbrella term for a perspective incorporating reaction against the sovereignty of science, the dominance of western tradition and the assumptions of epistemological progress(2000:73). According to him, some key features overlap and criss – cross, appear and disappear in discussion about postmodernism (ibid: 74).

Postmodernism projects, plurality of perspectives. Multiple perspectives accounts and theories are respected. Eclectic thinking, drawing on and synthesizing multiple cultural traditions is encouraged.

In its anti – essentialism, a text (be it an individual and a message, a concept or any significant structure) has no inherent essential meaning – no one thing in common that makes us use the same word and which would give us the essence of the concept; rather it is open to multiple interpretations.

By its anti – foundationalism, postmodernism view truth and knowledge of it as not based on a fixed foundation of objective reality. Instead truths are located in specific socio – cultural context, outside of which no vantage point exists.

The perspective also projects anti – scientism, particularly rejecting science as a foundation. Challenging the positivist assumptions that science is uniquely objective and value neutral. Contending that there is no fixed foundation of objective reality. Likewise ideology is at an end – no more grand narratives to legitimate and provide a correct interpretation of a wide range of events (Wonhcoth 2001).

Implication of Postmodernism Perspective

The impetus for postmodern worldview is the confusion of science that has given aid and comfort to those who want to end the project of formulating comprehensive worldview. Postmodernism props up the idea to abandon the quest for any kind of universality. Its critique of reason opens the door to forms of irrationalism and fideism that conflict a times with the deconstructive postmodernist (Cobb Jr 2002). Postmodernism depicts modernity as requiring the abandonment of all attempts to achieve a comprehensive vision of the world. Metaphysics is regarded as out of date. All thinking must be understood to be relative to the conditioned standpoint from which it arises. Where the standpoint is a privileged one, it is to be regarded with suspicion as an instrument of domination (ibid). The postmodern perspective attempts to unmask the false pretenses of modern thinkers abandoning efforts to achieve a coherent view of nature. Searching deeply, we shall better appreciate the implications of postmodernism when contrasted with modernism. For instance, in postmodernist approaches, individuals (or even groups) identity is not clearly and unambiguously defined, rather it shifts over time and is generally considered unstable. Here, it is primarily local circumstances and experiences of individuals' rather than large structural conditions or position and locations that are important in shaping these identities. The consequence is that social classes, ethnic groups or status groups may not exist in the manner described in social theory and the analysis of these does not provide useful way of understanding the contemporary social world. In other words, it considers shared circumstances or common situation of class, race or ethnicity as non – existent but

purely theoretical constructs that theorists attempt to impose of the social world. The result is that shared and common identities give way to shifting and localized identities that may or may not be shaped by the individual as identities are continually being formed, changed and particular individuals shift in and out of these experiences and situations, thus changing their identities.

The political implication of these is that it may be difficult to imagine collective action, social movement and social change towards some specific goal. Though some postmodernists argue that identities and localized situations are all that we should concern with, others argue that political action can still be useful means of improving society. Some point of view on important social questions argues that all identities, statements and texts are equally valid, and while these can be interpreted or read, no judgments on the validity or invalidity of these is possible or desirable.

Another important point to note is the common feature of postmodernism to reject grand theoretical approaches or met narratives entirely. Rather than searching for a theoretical approach that explains all aspects of society, postmodernism is more concerned with examining the variety of experiences of individuals and groups and it emphasizes difference over similarities and common experiences. To the postmodernists the modern world is fragmented, disrupted, disordered, interrupted and unstable – and may not be understandable on a large scale (Rosenau 1992: 170). A large part of this approach is its critique of grand theoretical approaches and deconstructs of texts. The implication here is that the reader becomes the interpreter of texts (ibid).

Postmodernism also makes it difficult to understand the plausibility of representation and social knowledge and its context in social realities. According to Giddens (1987) social knowledge is used to construct social reality. For example, attitudes are formed through public discourse which is guided by various theoretical and practical aspects that are formed through social knowledge. In other words, social reality such as urban structures, tax policy and its effects on income inequality, on media images and constructions are all products of social or economic policy or conscious intervention by those who attempt to influence social organization which are in turn guided by social knowledge. Social knowledge is developed by studies of

the seemingly real, but where the real is a social product, where does knowledge end and social reality begin?

A second interpretation is that of Baudrillard, whereby it becomes difficult to separate the social reality from its representation. In what he calls simulacra, that is an image, a material or mental representation of a person or thing; sometimes having merely the form or appearance of a certain thing, without possessing its substance or proper qualities. Since more are familiar with the representations than with the originals, and since these representations become part of the experiences and knowledge of people, then which is social reality and which is the representation. Again, media images become the social reality and the social reality is constructed with media images in mind. This makes distinction between knowledge, representation and social reality blurred. Smart (1990) observes that reflection itself becomes uncertain in this circumstance. This is exactly the problematic character of western metaphysics or philosophies, so that some argue that we are encountering its closure or end; an understanding which is experienced or lived as contingency (1990: 422).

Postmodernism viewed from this angle is revolutionary. The era of post modernity which heralded this approach is referred to as the incipient or actual dissolution of those social forms associated with modernity (Sarup 1993). Modernity itself came into being with the Renaissance or age of enlightenment in Europe, implying “the progressive economic and administrative rationalization and differentiation of the social world (ibid). Weiss and Wesley (2006) argue that modernity emerged in the context of the development of the capitalist state and its fundamental act is to question the foundation of past knowledge. The Humanities are a group of academic subjects united by a commitment to studying aspects of the human condition and a qualitative approach that generally prevents a single paradigm from coming to define any discipline. Through the Humanities, we reflect on the fundamental question; what does it mean to be human? The Humanities offer clues but never a complete answer. They reveal how people have tried to make moral, spiritual and intellectual sense of a world in which irrationality; despair, loneliness and death are as conspicuous as birth, friendship, hope and reason (Rockefeller 1980). The Humanities, through its emphasis on ethics, the good and the ideal, has prop it as inculcating virtues that make for a harmonious and

progressive ideal, where collaboration exist to advance collective good.

The Humanities focuses on inculcating requisite ingredients of a happy and fulfilled life and remain essential for the healthy development of any society (Osofisan 2004:16). This view aligns well with the rationalist approach to knowledge production, which clings to the faith that there is an objective reality out there that is waiting for the right method to come along and in the name of scientific progress, make use of, make sense of and give order to it (Derian 1997:57). Postmodernist propagate a polar opposite, as they view knowledge as tentative, multifaceted, and not necessarily rationally connected to any motivation or interest (Wonacot 2001). They contend that truth claims are always subject to challenge and knowledge is always kept in play rather than concluding on a particular emancipatory note. Knowledge is an expression of power, which is ever – present but not omnipotent. Learning is a process of continuous deconstruction of knowledge, of playing with contradictions, and of creativity and productivity opening the discourse of a field to an eclectic mosaic of many truths (Kilgore 2001:59 – 60).

Towards a New Synthesis in Knowledge Production

Postmodernism no doubt has affected a wide range of theoretical and applied parts of the social sciences and humanities. It spans many disciplines such as literatures, linguistics, politics, architecture, music, visual art, film, theatre, philosophy, sociology, anthropology and even the sciences. Its analysis and methodology in knowledge production is quite useful and relevant. But the perspective which is indeed revolutionary is its attack on modernism that shaped contemporary world.

No doubt it was the shortcoming of modernism which is purely Eurocentric that gave rise to philosophical assumptions challenging this approach. Most of the time, these meta narratives derived as truths, cannot be applied to the social world outside of Europe. Even within Europe where these new perspective is originating from, the factor of environmental conditions play significant role. However, the attempt of postmodernism to break down barriers among disciplines, times and traditions and attempt to analyze each of these makes it relevant, because the view of unchanging nature of man seems inadequate. Postmodern view of all forms of culture as of equal

validity tends to be useful corrective to the exclusivity and elevation of certain culture. However his extreme examination, can lead to trivializing culture and making it difficult to make positive statement about cultural development.

An important point to note is that even though European countries are in a postmodern era, a significant number of developing nations are only emerging from the premodern period and attempting to modernize. Of what value then does postmodernism portend for scholars, of peoples of the third world? What does these ideas that seem to deny progress, development and planned use of reason hold in spite of its value? This poses relevant questions about postmodernism and its utility for the third world. Very important aspect is its movement towards fragmentation, provisionality, performance, and instability something good or something bad? One of the consequence of these can be located in the rise of religious fundamentalism as a form of resistance to the question of grand narratives of religious truths, typical example been the ban on such postmodern books as Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* in some countries because they deconstruct such grand narratives.

This notwithstanding, there are some positive and common ground. For instance many agree that postmodernism brings a valuable spotlight on human nature and its role in constructing knowledge. Tisdell (1998) tells an illuminating postmodernist story about how her own position--her whiteness--informed her view of what was valid or relevant knowledge, to the detriment of an adult black student. Bachelder (1997) finds merit in, postmodernism even though with a modernist caveat: postmodernism has given us valuable insights that no inquiry is value-free and that all knowledge is human made, but this is not to say that all knowledge is just made up" (1997:10). Stufflebeam (1998) compares standards-based and postmodernist perspectives on personnel evaluation, in particular the role of value and bias, the social and political context, and the influence of power relationships.

Indeed, postmodernists and modernists share a fundamental, passionately held value--"the ethos of honesty and probity, criticism and analysis, the rooting out of dead dogmas, the constant examining and surpassing of current assumptions and practices in the name of emancipation from dangerous dogmas" (Hollinger 1994:169). Despite the swirling controversy over ontology, epistemology, and methodology, proponents and

critics alike seek Truth. Perhaps they differ on the means but not on the end. And what are we to make of all this? For Kilgore (2001), the most significant contribution of the postmodern worldview is the recognition and theoretical inclusion of the diversity of learners and their individual and collective voices.

Conclusion

Postmodernism offered a mixed bag of ideas. A critical examination reveals that it embodies new techniques of reading and new tool of criticism and emancipation as it mounts a challenge to fashionable doctrine of advanced theoretical wisdom. As an incipient paradigm that has its overall shape and character as vague; its substantive contribution is still shadowy and fragmentary. However postmodernism perspectives break the preconception of the normal way of doing things in the Humanities and pose some of the most potent question, with impact on many fields, from literature and visual arts to cultural studies and sociology. In each of these areas, the meaning of postmodernism is flexible, but in all cases we are forced to question some of our most cherished assumptions. As such postmodernism perspective suggest that our most ingrained ideas about the nature of history, culture, meaning and identity can no longer be taken for granted. Africa stands to benefit immensely from this perspective, as we can develop paradigms that address social reality in our environment, such that knowledge produced reflects our social world.

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