

Postmodernism as a Social Science Methodology: Comments on Haugerud's Representation of Kenya

DR. JOHN KOSKEY CHANG'ACH

jkchangach@yahoo.com

School of Education, Department of Educational Foundations, Moi University, Eldoret,
KENYA

Abstract - *The social scientist in Africa is presently inundated by a number of methodologies. Some of these methodologies are based on modernist theories such as: modernization, underdevelopment and dependency and the articulation of modes of production. Sometimes these modernist methodologies have emphasized empiricism that is based on either quantitative or qualitative data; at other times they have insisted on the use of theory. Over the last two decades or so an alternative methodology, namely postmodernism, has emerged to jostle with modernist methodologies for preference in usage. This paper defines this methodology and traces its origins and spread in Africa. It further outlines its forms then comments its usage by Angelique Haugerud in her book, **The Culture of Politics in Modern Kenya** (Haugerud, 1995). It is hoped that this paper will contribute more fruitfully to the debate on postmodernism than has resulted from other debates that are not based on analyses about the use of this methodology.*

Keywords – Postmodernism, Social Science, Methodology, Haugerud, Kenya

I. INTRODUCTION

There has never been a single and widely accepted definition of postmodernism. Whereas Lyotard (1995) defines it as a critique of meta-narratives, Rorty (as quoted in Sangren, 1988:419) sees it as a disavowal of epistemology. While Seidman (1995:2) conceives postmodernism as hybridization of knowledge, Fuchs and Ward (1994:482) call it skepticist anti-philosophy. As will be seen below, these definitions imply postmodernism's methodology, which has sometimes been equated with deconstruction. The post-colonial is another theory that has epistemological and methodological affinity to postmodernism. Indeed, the world of knowledge and its productions has become a world of post- and -isms.

Origins of Postmodernism

When and where did postmodernism originate? The origins of this new epistemology (this despite the anti-epistemology claims of postmodernism) have been traced back to the period during the Second World War, 1939-45. It is argued (Agger, 1994:501) that the War spawned crises in western culture and civilization that led to the questioning of enlightenment as the foundation of western knowledge. The crises included the collapse of western global hegemony, the fragmentation of the world system, the shift and/or establishment of new centres of capital accumulation. All these crises led westerners' disillusionment with

modernism. Gradually up till 1960s, and in a more determined manner, since the 1970s some western scholars sought new ways of explaining the new reality, the post-modern reality. The post-second World War crises and changes in technology led to changes in culture that could not be adequately explained by existing enlightenment theories. The question to post at this juncture is whether corresponding though not similar changes occurred in Africa to necessitate shifts in philosophical and methodological bases of knowledge or whether such shifts became inevitable because Africa happened to be part of an increasingly globalised world.

Spread into Africa

Denis Ekpo explains the spread of postmodernism as well as other theories such as modernism, Marxism etc. into Africa in terms of the European cultural conquest and the superiority of European rationality. He asserts (Ekpo, 1995:122):

At a certain point in its history, Africa came into contact with and suffered defeat at the hands of modern European rationality. The modernist culture blanket that Europe cast over Africa in the wake of this conquest meant above all the superimposition of logocentric rationality on native minds.

The fact that such minds have remained incarcerated in this rationality ever since proves the degree of success of the European cultural conquest.

But Ekpo also believes that just as Africans used Western ideas of democracy and nationalism to fight European colonialism, they can similarly employ postmodernism to regain their intellectual independence. In his own words (Ekpo, 1995:124):

Postmodernism furnishes the most uncanny access and insight into the production mechanisms of the basic texts of western rationality/power. And since it was largely in the logocentric intertextuality of rationality that the African mind formed itself, an insight into the western Logos will certainly help to uncover some of the conceptual snares which the modern African mind got into while trying to stay in the Logos to assert its own rationality and difference vis-à-vis the Logos.

Ekpo therefore dismisses Afro-centrism as a non-starter in the quest for an authentic of knowledge.

Christopher Lowe (1997:299), on the other hand, explains the adoption of postmodernism by Africanist scholars as a consequence of academic globalism and a desire on the part of these scholars “to test and modify (western) theories and to discover the unquestionable assumptions underlying them so as to more adequately describe and interpret African realities.” This is not the place to critique Ekpo and Lowe’s views. They both fail to realize that a postmodernist methodology is not near. As will be clear below. African scholars particularly historians have always used aspects of it, for instance, linguistic and textual analysis.

II. THEORETICAL PREMISES AND METHODOLOGY

The basic argument by the proponents of postmodernism is as follows:-

Technological and cultural developments have produced complex societies that are characterized by plurality of knowledge, fractured and porous identities and decentred societies and politics. This has led to a re-thinking of human studies and their theoretical bases. Established knowledge is less and less mere correspondence of word and world, statistics and reality.

Postmodernism is therefore premised on hybrid discourses, uniting the empirical and the rhetorical, the cognitive and the moral, the analytical and the practical, the theoretical and the literary. Postmodernism therefore entails a plurality of approaches and conceptual strategies to capture the essence and nature of multiple social realities, identities, knowledge and power.

Post-modern social analysis is a hermeneutic inquiry, (Seidman, 1995:14-15). It is an evaluation of conflicting perspectives. Postmodernism shifts the agenda of social theory and research from explanation and verification to a conversation of scholars/rhetors who seek to guide and persuade themselves and each other (Brown, Seidman, 1995:231).

Postmodernism emphasizes dialogic and polyphonic writing. Rather than having a ‘monophonic’ account depicting events and persons from a single viewpoint, the many-sidedness of even the simplest reality would be reflected in the many voices, which would speak for themselves in the multi-vocal multi-graph. (Robotham, 1997:3640).

Postmodernist methodology consists of three main activities: textual analysis, the foundation of narrative substances and representation of knowledge. These activities take place simultaneously and language occupies a central role in all of them. Let us look at each of these activities in turn.

Since language is central to texts, narratives and representation let’s begin with it. Language is expressive and therefore communicative of the individuals’ and society’s thought and knowledge (Seidman, 1995: 133-34, Brown, 1995:233 and 238). Yet as a sign, language is opaque, self-referential, intentional and metaphorical (Ankersmit 1990:295). Meaning can only be distilled from it through speech and writing, both of which are incomplete representations of reality (Culler 1993:95-100). What this implies is that meaning is always deferred. This has methodological implications for texts and their analysis, narratives and representation.

Broadly defined, texts are the lived experiences of communities. In fact postmodernists have argued that society is itself a text. This lived experience is represented by the social scientists’ mathematical/statistical model; the historian’s archival record, a community’s oral tradition that includes myth and ritual; a writer’s novel and even a government’s public program. Texts are said to be self-referential and intentional (Ankersmit, 1990:280). According to Brown (1995:233) meaning does not reside automatically within a text; there are also subtexts

within a single text, not with one but many voices and meanings. The researcher is therefore called upon to make meanings out of the texts. Theoretically, Brown (1995:233) argues, a given text is open to as many interpretations as there are articulate readers. As a postmodernist methodology, discourse or textual analysis therefore entails not just the interpretation of a single text but of many texts and not just one interpretation but many.

Texts ought to be analyzed within the framework of specific contexts i.e. ‘unique configurations and historical trajectories’ (Seidman, 1995:129). According to Comaroff and Comaroff (1992) context encompasses such variables as culture (semantic space, the field of signs and practices in which human beings construct and represent themselves and others); politics and power; suppressed and expressed knowledge; dominant ideologies and counter-ideologies and finally, local, national and global conditions. Together these variables provide linguistic, textual and narrative space and the postmodernist researcher is required to take cognizance of them when constructing and deconstructing narratives.

But what are narratives? Which texts, realities and meanings should they represent? These constitute the basic questions in postmodernist methodology and their answers are the basis of the difference between it and modernist methodology. Jerzy Topolski’s definition of narratives is modernist. He states that narratives are a “report on the results of research, that is, a coherent sequence of statements about specified facts....systems of statements which form answers to research questions posed” (Topolski 1976:605). This definition implies that research in the social sciences is capable of providing definite answers to research problems and questions that are reflective of the truth or social reality. This notion is rejected by post-modernism whose methodology is grounded on doubt. Ankersmit (1990:278) therefore defines narratives as snapshots of the (past) reality. He goes on to state that narrative substances which are constructed from texts to represent reality consist of a great number of individual statements defining, describing and explaining that reality (Ankersmit 1988:219). According to him and other postmodernists, narratives are mere “proposals connecting things and words” (Ankersmit 1990:282), “proposals of how we should see (part of) reality” (ibid. 283). As proposals, narratives are contested. A narrative substance is identified because there are other narrative substances. Moreover, even those that have been identified, are not permanent they change as new narratives are proposed (ibid 283). Postmodernist

methodology therefore eschews meta-narratives and their claims to truth and reality.

For postmodernists representation is therefore indeterminate and subject to context (Ankersmit 1988 211-212), anti-empiricist, anti-objectivist, anti-essentialist, anti-statistical and anti-aggregative. By its very nature, the postmodernists insist social life and reality is not easy to represent. As Comaroff and Comaroff (1992:20) have explained:

The meaningful world is always fluid and ambiguous, a partially integrated mosaic of narratives, images and signifying practices. Its forms – which are indivisibly semantic and material, social and symbolic – appear paradoxically to be at the same time (and certainly over time) coherent yet chaotic, authoritative yet arguable, highly systematic yet unpredictable, consensual yet internally contradictory.

Postmodernists therefore imply that the representation of such a complex world and social reality draw from a wide variety of methodologies: observation of actual human activities; analysis of textual material such as archival records, newspapers, official publications, novels, popular songs, symbolic practice, human bodies etc.; imagination; critical thinking; analysis of different theories (eclecticism) and drawing from any disciplines. Is this really new? Haven’t historians and other social scientist been doing this before? Perhaps the issue here is that while in the West published works constitutes much of the raw material for textual analysis on Africa we still need to record oral texts. We have also not published enough. Postmodernism has not been accepted by the entire academic community in Africa and overseas. Debate continues to rage among its proponents and opponents. This is not the place to delve into details about its debate and mention is only made about the stated advantages and disadvantages. It is also useful to mention that this debate has not proceeded from a common plat-form as the pro-postmodernists have tended to argue from their own premises while pro-modernists have done the same. The former have stated that postmodernist productions of knowledge are people-driven from below, that it brings forth suppressed or repressed memories, that it does not essentialise or privilege any particular perspective and that it represents the different knowledge’s in a plaintive and more understandable manner (Rorty 1988,

Lyotard, Seidman). The latter have countered this position by asserting that in equating knowledge with wordplay, texts, a mere critique of existing knowledge, imagination, armchair philosophy and taking evidence highly the postmodernists have aesthetised, trivialized and infantilized knowledge (Sangren, 1988:415-422, Zangorin, 1990:265, Rigby 1992:22, Henige, 1995:315-318, Mohan, 1997:32 and Aseka, 1995).

Haugerud's Representation of Kenya

Haugerud's purpose is to demonstrate that Kenya's image can be portrayed in a more balanced manner than the stereotype that the prosperous and stable days ended in 1990. She also wants to demonstrate that there has never been a dramatic break in the everyday forms of political, economic and social life. This life is characterized by constant contests, conflicts and instability. *Baraza* has continuously played a key role in the governance and political culture of the country. Whilst these concerns cannot be said to be exclusively postmodernist, the author's conceptual framework, methodology main arguments and the manner of their presentation in the first three chapters, in particular, can be said to belong to this genre.

Haugerud employs a multi-disciplinary approach as she combines history, anthropology and political economy. This approach helps her to effectively capture the culture of politics in Kenya. Of significance is the way the presentation of the historical process is freely allowed to move from the present, the 1990s to the past, the 1890s and back to the present; from Nairobi the capital of Kenya to rural Embu, which is her main area of study, and back again. Though unconventional, this free play with time and space helps Haugerud to represent historical processes meaningfully; it also affords the reader easy comprehension of historical change.

The author does not explicitly state, though she implies, that the approach she employs in the work is postmodernist. She states:

The approach taken in the present study is not necessarily to assume the absence of structural regulations, but rather to try as Camaroff (...) put it, "to capture the interplay of structural constraint and situational contingency" (Haugerud, 1995:9)

She continues to assert that:

To explore the questions explored in this study requires constantly shifting

angles of vision: one that captures the interplay of local, national and international forces, one that experiments theoretically with combined attention to strategy and constraint; conflict and cohesion; resistance and domination; and small scale and large scale processes (Haugerud, 1995:9).

Indeed, it is the postmodernist approach that has helped the author to construct the narrative substances in the book as will be seen below. But Haugerud also states that the postmodernist conceptual framework is by itself not capable of addressing certain issues such as whether Kenya's political upheavals during the 1990s were more than an unaltered flow of surface images. Her methodological position is as follows:

This question demands a look beyond post-modernist celebrations of the ephemeral, the fragmentary, the polyphonous and beyond an aestheticised politics. The challenge here is to examine the arts of politics, to recognize the power of images from (contested versions of) history, or to treat the culture of politics as a domain autonomous from material political-economic processes (Haugerud, 1995: 53).

Her answer to this stated limitation of postmodernism is resort to theoretical and methodological eclecticism. She uses post-modern methodologies to analyze political culture. She also uses models based on structural regularities such as Theodore Shanin's random oscillations, Chayanov's household demographic cycles and Lenin's economic differentiation of rural households to analyze economic and social processes in rural Embu in chapters 5 and 6 of the book. Although postmodernism derides the use of such meta-narratives at the same time it tolerates their use as an eclectic device.

The other postmodernist device that Haugerud has used is language. She rightly views language as a multifunctional, denotational, indexical and symbolic of social action. Regarding chapter three, she states:

In addressing the language of politics this chapter draws attention to the "linguistic work" necessary to create

and maintain any political arena. It looks at the unexplained theme of how public display of linguistic effect helps to consolidate relations of power or hegemony in a nation state. (Haugerud, 1995:58).

Baraza, public meetings that have been used by administrative officials and politicians since the colonial days provide the text with a variety of performances. Haugerud admirably details how linguistic and other performances in *baraza* and funerals signify a variety of meanings for the speaker, the audience and the occasion. For instance, the sitting arrangement, those invited to speak and the length of time they are given, the mode of attire, the topics discussed, what is not discussed, the style of rhetoric, the responses of the audience including the murmurs from the back of the crowd are all suggestive. They have enabled Haugerud to demonstrate the importance of *baraza*. She also appreciates the difficulties faced in the translation and interpretation of language, particularly a foreign one. In particular, she prints out the “cloudy” and “non-transparent” nature of public oratory and the unspoken gestures such as twitches and winks (Haugerud, 1995:2).

Apart from observing and recording performances in *baraza*, Haugerud adopted other research techniques such as oral interviews, household surveys, analyses of archival data and secondary sources. She also used biographical sketches of two headmen in Embu for illustrative purposes. These different methodologies correct the inadequacies that exist in the exclusive use of any of them.

The foregoing conceptual frameworks and methodologies that are partly postmodernist have enabled Haugerud to represent a fairly realistic image of the culture of politics in Kenya. According to her, this culture is characterized by exuberant showmanship, state authoritarianism, paternalism and political dissent and acquiescence. In a clearly postmodernist fashion, she argues that this national culture is a loose collection of shifting meanings that are multiple-authored (ibid. p. 103). Her main thesis is that this culture is exhibited in *baraza* which has become “a key political ritual and state-building institution” in the country. But *baraza* is also a symbolic battleground, a site of struggle in which Kenya’s political culture is contested. It is where the president’s personal rule and state authority citizens and state leaders together but also shows the economic and social gap between them. It is an arena where state elite use political oratory to foster national unity and loyalty

to the ruling party but also an occasion where opposition parties rally their ethnic supporters; it is also where state officials articulate the promises that the regime is usually not able to meet. Haugerud’s representation therefore allows opposing texts and narratives to engage in contest over the reality about Kenya’s political culture.

A major flaw in Haugerud’s representation of Kenya is the narrow context within which the representation is rendered. Embu, which is the focus of Haugerud’s analysis, is hardly compared with any other local community in Kenya. Though mentioned, the role of central government, non-governmental and international institutions in structuring the political economy and in influencing the culture of Kenya is not adequately discussed.

III. CONCLUSION

The following observations can be made in conclusion first; in spite of the arguing disagreements between pro-modernists and part-modernists, postmodernism possesses methodological value. As had already been stated, because of its advocacy of linguistic and textual analysis and instance that many meanings can be derived from the different interpretation of texts, post-modernist methodology’s usefulness inheres in opening up new ways of interpreting the world around us. Secondly, we should ignore the chest thumping among the Western postmodernists that they are the discoverers of a new methodology. Historians and other social scientists in Africa have employed the postmodernist methodology for quite a while now without calling it by this name. Unlike western postmodernists, African scholars should not shy from drawing conclusions from their research, however, tentative these may be. Thirdly, research in Africa should use postmodernist methodology in combination with others as has been demonstrated by Haugerud’s interesting work in Embu. In any case postmodernism is by nature eclectic and multi-and inter-disciplinary. Finally, in the case of Africa postmodernism calls for more oral, archaeological and archival and other research for purposes of providing more published texts. It is until such times that like the postmodernists in the West African scholars will be content with the analysis of published texts.

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