

## The Paradoxical Legacy of Postmodernism

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Anthropologists, paradoxically including those most often identified by others as postmodernists, persistently have refused to identify themselves as such. The label usually is applied by detractors as dismissal without nuance; it attributes to the adherents of so-called postmodernism demonic efforts to undermine the authority and credibility of their own discipline, especially in its scientific aspirations. Despite such uncompromising critiques, however, the mainstream tenor of anthropology is not as it was before the advent of anthropological postmodernism, usually arbitrarily dated to the twin bibles of George Marcus, James Clifford and Michael Fischer and their associates in 1986 (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986). Many, perhaps the majority, of us are grateful for some of the changes while lamenting others and declining to buy fully into the new dispensation. Like T.S. Eliot's Magi, many of the partial converts are not entirely sure what to do with themselves when they return home—has the world really changed or has it not?

A quarter century has passed, perhaps time for the dust to settle, sufficient time and distance that we can now begin to take stock. What have we gained? Has the gain come with too great a cost? Was it a "scientific revolution" offering a new paradigm statement? If so, has it evolved into what Thomas Kuhn called "normal science"? My own reflections run along the lines of "well there is this...but then there is that..." It seems clear that we need to question our interpretations and that we should not expect internal consensus; but this is a very postmodernist approach and perhaps a prejudice. Whereas many of us are challenged by some of this stuff, others very definitely and vocally are not. There is minimal agreement about the exemplars of postmodernist anthropology or about the value of particular ethnographies and theoretical works. I am inclined to think that this is healthy, that the debates enrich our work regardless of our ultimate judgments about postmodernism, whatever that may mean to different people.

The 1986 prophets of the new era, primarily contributors to *Writing Culture: The Politics and Poetics of Ethnography*, called for innovative methods of conceptualizing the work of anthropologists as writers of ethnography that would foreground the agency and dialogic capacity of the ethnographer. They called for new experimental forms of interpretation drawn from literary studies that would create new genres of writing, as though no anthropologist had ever considered such issues before.

Although the exemplars cited in 1986 were few in number, thin in actual experimentation and oblivious to work published before the 1980s, the core contributors must have been onto something because there are far more experimental ethnographies that one could cite now. Many take up the challenge to incorporate politics and poetics into the ethnographic enterprise. As a frequent adjudicator for the Victor Turner Prize for Ethnographic Writing of the Society for Humanistic Anthropology, a constituent section of the very mainstream American Anthropological Association, I can attest to the literary quality as well ethnographic depth of much of the writing being done by Canadian and American colleagues. Much of this work could not have been done in the same way without the postmodern turn.

Nonetheless, methods of qualitative analysis have been conventional in the writing of ethnography since Malinowski, with postmodernism's much favoured life history taking prize of place among them. Malinowski's "imponderabilia of everyday life" and even Franz Boas' "native point of view" may be weighed differently today within the anthropologist's toolkit, but they have been there all along. Despite continuities, however, ethnographies look different these days: we put words in quotation marks to problematize the absence of shared meaning underlying their usage; we invent new words or hyphenate old ones to emphasize their etymologies or simultaneous but alternative senses; we attribute parity of analytic thought to consultants—promoted at least in rhetoric from being merely research subjects—who use quite different terms to express concepts that we choose to reword in "anthropological theory." Moreover, anthropologists wander further astray than we used to from the boundaries of our own discipline in search for theorists who can speak alongside our ethnographic insights.

Under the influence of postmodernism, anthropologists began to cite French theorists in preference to their own disciplinary ancestors. Foucault and his poststructuralist cohort entered into dialogue constructed by selected extracts from their written texts juxtaposed with quotations drawn from ethnographic interviews—all under the firm ethnographic authority, i.e., control, of the anthropologist as narrator. Voices from the margins were drawn by the ethnographer's pen into the discourses of the mainstream in an aspiration to disrupt Western society's long and arguably complacent conversation with itself. For most, however, logocentrism or metanarrative has remained the insidious and only superficially interrogated baseline of our conversations with the still largely incommensurable, unintelligible, mysterious "other" (assuming that an undifferentiated

postcolonial “other” is an inverse denial of genuine difference). Perhaps we have not gone far enough, rather than having gone too far, along the yellow brick road to a postmodernist Oz. Is the wizard a chimera or is the ethnographic journey itself the point, sufficient unto itself? Can postmodernism answer such questions, or must we return to the canons of more conventional ethnography for our answers?

The critics insist that postmodernism undermines science because its adherents deny the possibility of objectivity. In practice, anthropologists fall along a temporal continuum and lack consensus about the degree of subjectivity inherent in any interpretation. Positivist science has been under attack at least since its heyday after the Second World War. The turn to meaning and language in 1960s anthropology, across the social sciences and humanities, clearly prefigured the 1980s turn to postmodernism, although the precursors remained unacknowledged in the face of proponents’ blatant rhetoric of discontinuity. Further, naysayers opposed the interpretive turn long before everything found to be threatening could be bundled and dismissed as postmodernism.

Borrowing methods from literary criticism and cultural studies seemed to many to trivialize the distinction between truth in the world and fiction as aesthetic construction. Critics argued that the social scientist must eschew the literary license open to a novelist or poet and ignored the lessons of those acolytes of the *sciences humaines* who could sometimes convey the quality and texture of cross-cultural worlds with an emotional power rarely found in conventional ethnography. In contrast, to do social science at all seemed to most of those who adopted literary strategies and genres to require a continued commitment to real-world accuracy—whatever the subjectivity of our possible relationship to it. Moreover, they argued that social scientists retain the right, indeed the responsibility, to evaluate alternative interpretations against one another. Some interpretations are better than others and few of us deny our capacity to decide which is which. Awareness of interpretive standpoint in our conclusions, reflexively acknowledged, allows other interlocutors, including both readers and ethnographic subjects, to offer their versions and to draw judgments that must themselves be interpreted in context. Infinite regress? Perhaps, but with a verisimilitude to the world that is too often lacking in macro-generalizations from more ostensibly scientific quarters of the discipline—at least in the opinion of this unrepentant sort-of-postmodernist with a commitment to foreground the everyday worlds of ordinary folk across surface barriers of culture and personal experience.

Postmodernism has been accused of denying the continuities and decisive conclusions of history. This myopia is our disciplinary business because the scope of anthropology has always encompassed human cultural and biological variability across both time and space. Past, present and future have been blurred and transfigured by the collisions and interminglings of postmodernist experimentation and by the insertion into historical reasoning of contemporary metaphors and preoccupations. Pastiche ostensibly replaces genealogy. If antecedents make no difference, then much of traditional scholarship becomes instantly irrelevant. Anachronism no longer matters. As an historian of anthropology, I argue to the contrary that there are multiple histories of anthropology, that they move in diverse ways into the anthropological present, and that it matters how we got to where we are now. I take for granted that ideas about the human come in cycles as well as lines and that we need not perpetually reinvent the same wheels. Moreover, we of the Western world are not the only ones to have ideas about such matters; our conversations across histories and worldviews open up a wider discourse whose reciprocal edification seems to me the goal of a humanistic and engaged anthropology and the core of anthropology’s unique contribution to the social sciences and to an enlarged public discourse.

Some have charged that the purported nihilism of postmodernism smoothes out apparent conflicts into mere differences of standpoint, in the process obscuring systemic relations of power and masking social inequities. On the other side of this coin, just as identity politics was giving effective voice to minorities of gender, race, ethnicity, et cetera, some so-called postmodernists denied the political significance of the newly liberated voices. They have declined to prioritize multiple voices. A cynic might conclude that powerful gatekeepers had found yet another way to silence dissension despite the altruistic and egalitarian intentions of the would-be dialogists and the eagerness of their collaborators to be heard in their own terms. I suggest that acknowledgement of one’s own standpoint need not preclude ethical commitment or political activism—indeed it may be the necessary precondition for principled action.

Much of the debate over postmodernism has proceeded in mutual recrimination and paranoia that the opposite camp will gain advantage, that their own work—whether traditional or postmodern—will somehow fail, if it has not already, to attract a new generation of young anthropologists. Do we still need anthropology in a world overtaken by globalization and neo-liberal capitalism? If so, do we need to label what I gloss as “thinking like an anthropologist” as “anthropology”? Maybe not, though I

would be sad to lose our tradition of defamiliarization, aspiration to coevalness in encounter, and two-way dialogue with initially unfamiliar and perhaps even alien-seeming persons and communities, only to learn that we can be at home, albeit away from home, there also. Then we come back and try to explain to colleagues, students and a larger public what we have learned in other places that they will never visit but in our globalizing world must attempt to meet with empathy. This is where we have to use every tool in our bricoleur's toolkit, as ethnographic writers and as theorists. I believe that our toolkit has been substantially expanded by postmodernism—as long as you let me define what it is. I promise to let you have your definitions also, as long as we both are clear about how you are using the term so we can talk about it productively.

### References

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### Fun with Fads: What Comes Next Was Probably Here Before (Plus Ça Change)

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Why “posts”? Why “-isms”? And why “modern”? In two places early on in *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, Marcus and Fischer spoke of the times as “post-conditions,” all coming after contrasting terms, and defined in Lyotardian terms as “incredulity towards meta-narratives” (1999:8, 24). Yet, when they wrote about new exemplary texts (1999:67-73) they wrote of these as “modernist.” Subsequently, much criticism emerged on the whole concept of modernity, not to speak of modernization. And the congeries of viewpoints said to be postmodern themselves turned into postmodernism, which became its own meta-narrative after all. What price, then, the triad encapsulated in “post” “modern” “-ism”? Is it just the creation of a new school out of the ruins of old ones, this time rejecting the fragmentary ruins themselves? Marcus and Fischer's own work was actually re-constructionist, looking for new ways to push the envelope of ethnographic

writing. After the first shocks and aftershocks of negative critiques, ethnography emerged again as a prime instrument of anthropologists, as it was before, but equipped to move in a more thoughtful and reflective way to achieve its goals. Skeptical responses to earlier grand theory were rooted as much in changing historical times as in any independent turns of theory and so illustrated the point that everything exists in a historical flow.

To this context belong labels for historical periods, such as post-Socialist, post-colonial, post-Fordist, a potentially endless proliferation of posts which carry the potentially valuable message that the past still constrains the present, but tend to obscure the point that new social and political formations arise and entirely new responsibilities emerge from these. New political conflicts may develop from struggles between leaders whose styles and sources of support may nevertheless harken back even beyond the colonial period. No political system, for example, Socialism or Democracy, is a panacea: it can generate new conflicts. “Neoliberalism” is currently blamed for many ills: but like all “isms,” it needs to be factored into its specific parts and itself seen in longer runs of time. No panaceas again. Nor does it help to add neos to neos (what would neo-neo-liberalism be?) Finally, here, the times can coincide: post-Fordist production, for example, has not simply replaced Fordist but co-exists with it.

The most stultifying and pretentious versions of post-modernist critiques have sometimes been labeled “post-Toasty” or solipsistic. However, while extreme doubt and uncertainty regarding knowledge would ultimately be self-defeating, knowledge challenged on reflexive grounds can emerge on a stronger basis: what does not kill, strengthens. At the same time, one learns to be wary of fashions, of statements, like “blue is the new red,” portrayed with brilliant irony in the film *Wall-E* (Stanton 2008)—or as stated in a recent academic interaction, Agency is now old fashioned and we must speak of Creativity only (i.e., what fits with that particular academic's current work which they wish to impose on others). And if we have never been modern, as Bruno Latour claimed, we cannot really have been post-modern either.

The “post-modern condition” is best seen as a temporary halting in the flow of things, a moment of trying to step back and think. As such, it remains a useful corrective: the transition from “Saussure to not so sure after all” is a necessary moment in any enquiry, but it need not mean coming to a grinding halt.

The re-constructionist theories that have emerged after the post-modernist hiatus include various attempts to grasp the contemporary historical scene, such as the local-global distinction, which Thomas Hylland Eriksen