

*Review*

## On the Plausibility of Postmodernism

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Postmodernism is an intellectual movement that has become a concept to be wrestled with. Probably, any movement may fade away in future, but die we doubt. It is believed that everything which is nomadic and parodic is susceptible to develop. In fact, something which develops is, per se, productive, and postmodernism is not an exception. The present paper is an attempt to review the main tenets of postmodernism, appraise its main features critically, and hold that postmodernism, as an intellectual movement, is not stable, but dynamic; it repeatedly creates itself without losing its significant features.

**Key Words:** deconstruction, individualism, modernism, postmodernism

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### INTRODUCTION

Over the last decades, postmodernism has become a concept to be grappled with. Too much ink has been spilled against postmodern ideology. Kirby (2006) describes the postmodernism world as a kind of pseudo-modernism—a return to the appearances of modernity, but without the quality. To Kirby, postmodernism is dead and buried. Along the same lines, Chomsky (1996) declares that postmodernism is meaningless since it does not add anything to our analytical or empirical knowledge. To Chomsky, postmodernists are charlatans. He asserts that postmodernism will have terrible effects on the third world. He goes on to hold that the third world needs serious intellectuals to take part in the existing struggles rather than ranting about postmodern absurdities. If they are all ranting postmodernists, they

are gone. In this regard, Guattari (1984, cited in Bazargani and Larsari, 2015) asserts that postmodernist visions of the world were not flexible enough to seek explanations in psychological, social, and environmental domains at the same time. In sum, to the critics of postmodernism, it "covers an ill-defined galaxy of ideas—ranging from art and architecture to the social sciences and philosophy" (Sokal and Bricmont, 1998, p. 182). Seen from this stance, such drastic measurements are, more or less, compatible with the modernists who pretend to have answers to everything. Such a totalitarian and absolutist perspective will undeniably seek for obedience and control. To an absolutist, truth can only be discovered by setting up rigorous empirical experiments. Incompatible with such totalitarian perspectives, the

present paper makes an endeavor to elaborate on the main tenets of postmodernists whose stance is somewhat relativist and flexible.

### Individualism in Postmodernism

More critically, the concept of postmodernism is not widely understood today. In fact, postmodernism is a movement that has shaken the whole structure of modernism. In a sense, it is more of a religion than a science (McKinley, 2000). McKinley states that the origin of postmodernism is emanated from the Western emphasis on individualism, which makes postmodernists reluctant to acknowledge the existence of distinct multi-individual cultures. Religious individualism is individualism of tolerance, not the individualism of violence. Everybody must be allowed to freely utter his/her opinions. Individualism, in postmodernism, marks out the fact that different voices are susceptible to be heard. Put differently, postmodernism incompatible with the rationalization of modern world insists that culling should not take place; thus, the multiplicity of systems and theories are susceptible to co-exist productively.

In effect, the root of tension between these two warring camps (i.e., postmodernism and modernism) is the notion of truth. To modernists, truth exists independent of human consciousness and can be known through the application of reason. Such a monolithic epistemology is in sharp contrast with the tenets of postmodernism which is pluralist in epistemology and celebrates the individuality. Postmodernism sticks modernism's autonomous individualism to the margin. The individuality of postmodernism is the individuality of openness. Based on postmodernists, rather than dominating others with one's individual version of reality, it is legitimate to accept all beliefs as equally valid (Leffel, 1996). In practicality, "the human subject is shaped from the flux and plurality of discourses" (Edgley, 2005, p.134). For postmodernists, "such conception of the human subject logically lends itself to valuing liberty" (Edgley, 2005, p. 134).

Hegel (1981, cited in Makidon, 2004) is among the earliest who opens the door wide to postmodernism. To him, truth is not apart from man, but within the mind. In other words, truth is dependent of human consciousness. Truth is a matter of inwardness and subjectivity. Besides, there are multiple ways of knowing in order to construct the given truth. In short, postmodernists assert that searching for objective truth is dangerous since it always does violence by excluding other voices. As Leffel (1996) puts forth, truth claims are essentially tools to legitimate power. To Leffel, the dogmatist, the totalizer, the absolutist is both naive and dangerous.

Philosophically speaking, postmodernism is an intellectual movement on par with other relevant twentieth

century isms such as existentialism (Alizadeh, 2013). Lyotard (1984) was the first who referred to postmodernism as a philosophical term. Lyotard defines postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarrativeness" (p. 24). Lyotard—earlier an adherent of Marxism—was one of the most potent metanarratives of the modern age, but then turned his back on Marxism. Lyotard drawing on Wittgenstein's idea of the language game asserts that different groups of people use the same language in different ways, which in turn can result in their looking at the world in quite separate ways. As a result, Lyotard devalues the notion of a dominant narrative. Put differently, there is no single narrative, no system or theory that overlays all others. Hence, Lyotard argues, all narratives can exist together, side by side; in a sense, no one can insert its domination into the other unilaterally. Henceforward, the confluence of narratives is the essence of postmodernism (Docx, 2011).

The eclectic nature of postmodernism is emanated from two interrelated arguments: epistemological and ideological (Spiro, 1996). Both arguments "are based on subjectivity. First, in any event the subjectivity of human subjects precludes the possibility of science discovering objective truth...Second, since objectivity is an illusion, science according to the ideological argument, subverts oppressed groups" (p. 579). Besides the devaluation of objectivity, the sociology of knowledge is embedded in the postmodern epistemology which is inclined toward an attack on the notion of objectivity which implies that it is impossible to gather data based on specific perspectives. In other words, objectivity is incompatible with the aggregation of independent interpretations from various perspectives that may yield an unbiased picture of reality.

More importantly, "postmodernism argues that the image of totality observed in modernism is not simply false but dangerous since it results in conformity" (Maftoon and Shakouri, 2013, p. 308). Along the same vein, Chernus (1992) asserts that if we impose our experience on others in order to achieve conformity, we certainly close our eyes to many new experiences and become narrow-minded. Thus, as to Chernus, what postmodernists claim is that human beings are free from the pressure for conformity; they are more in touch with the way things really are. In fact, what postmodernists are compatible with is the notion of individuality and the rejection of all 'totalizing theories' (Boyne & Rattansi, 1990, p. 12). Furthermore, it is "an interrogation of Western discourse's desire for certainty and absolutes" (Sholle, 1992, p. 275).

In sum, postmodernism is compatible with opening texts up to show how meaning is organized in powerful interpretations. In fact, the restriction of meaning in texts needs to be deconstructed (Usher and Edwards, 1994).

## Deconstruction of Language

The thrust of Derrida's (1978) idea of deconstruction is that human language, whether spoken or written, does not refer to an objective world out there, but instead a system of linguistic signs referring back to itself (Hulse, 2007). For Derrida (1978), a text has no point of reference outside itself. Fixed meanings are generated by a mobile army of metaphors. Similarly, postmodernism is the sister of existentialism. As to Hulse (2007), existentialism is a revolt against rationalism. Put differently, existentialism focuses on the inner experiences of beliefs, imagination, and intention. To existentialism, there is no meaning in any one thing, or in everything put together. The world is absurd and pointless. Aspiring to a unified representation of the world or picturing it as a totality is gibberish. What we choose makes ourselves. In fact, choices have no rational basis or purpose, so it does not matter what we choose (Hulse, 2007). In sum, for Derrida (1978), everything is textualized. Put differently, "every text is intertexts" (Leitch, 1983, p. 59) or "all intertexts are texts" (Plett, 1991, p. 5). Deconstruction or intertextuality (Mai, 1991), then, "in foregrounding the text as 'subject', constitutes selves or subjects as texts. Subjects are enmeshed in language and cultural significations. [There] is no independent reference point, noun mediated presence from which they can know and create themselves" (Usher and Edwards, 1994).

Along the same run, the tenets of postmodernism are continually redefined. Something which is apt to be redefined is surely inclined toward productivity. Moreover, "what is productive is not sedentary, but nomadic" (Harvey, 1989, p. 44). In postmodernism, "knowledge should be nomadic and parodic. It should playfully emphasize the discontinuities, openness, randomness, ironies, reflexivity, incoherence, and multiphrenic qualities of texts which can no longer be read with the intention of extracting a systematic interpretation" (Fearherstone, 2007, p. 122). Postmodernism is a movement that swims, even wallows. Postmodernists believe that actions, thoughts, and desires can be developed by proliferation, juxtaposition, and disjunction (Foucault, 1983). Thus, as to Harvey (1989), "it harks back to the wings of thought" (p. 51). In fact, "whereas modernists had presupposed that there was a tight and identifiable relation between what was being said (the signified or message), poststructuralist [and postmodernists] thinking see these as continually breaking apart and re-attaching in new combinations" (Harvey, 1989, p. 49). Parallel to the same argument, final meaning cannot be fixed because the historical process of appropriation never stalls, they still do not give up the possibility of actual meaning (Mai, 1991). In a sense, there is no common ideology in postmodernism that individuals share because what is true for one is not

true for the other.

## No Fixed Ideology: Hard to Die

Postmodernism is an intellectual movement that "has as many lives as a cat" (Alizadeh, 2013, p. 155). And it is continually redefined. It escapes from stagnation. What a postmodernist is compatible with today might become the source of challenge for the postmodernists in future. Thus, Postmodernism, as Bertens (1997) maintains, "has been protean rather than fixable and has again and again remade itself without, however, losing its most distinctive qualities" (p. 3). Put differently, postmodernism of 1960s, for example, does not necessarily involve the same tenets of the postmodernism of 1970s. In fact, what makes postmodernism live is its indifference toward ideologies. Postmodernists are ideologically indifferent and apolitical. Postmodernism indifference toward an unstable ideology is the reason of its tolerance with a variety of ideologies.

In fact, a postmodernist is not in search for a new system or theory. Similarly, postmodernists are "devoid of any ideological disposition" (Mozejko, 1997, p. 443). They are anti-foundationalists. In other words, "postmodernism implies an anti-foundational critic of all metanarratives" (Featherstone, 2007, p. 122). Postmodernists do not claim that a new system is better than that another one. It would only do an appreciation of the present system. In fact, no system of meaning can have a monopoly on the truth, but that we still have to render the truth through our chosen system of meaning. Having an inflexible taste is a prejudice which should be avoided by individuals and/or groups active in seeking adaptations outside the box. Recall that, you can't be a part of something and separate at once. In the same line, narratives cannot be narratives if they are not juxtaposed.

Compatible with incommensurable theories raised by Kuhn (1970), postmodernists claim that everything is equally valid. However, this does not mean a letter written by Noam Chomsky is as equally valid as the letter written by a layman. Of course, we never thought through. However, different voices should be allowed to be heard since if we remove all voices, we are left with nothing but the one prescribed. Therefore, one does not have to accept every pronouncement of postmodernists to be postmodern. Indeed, it might be better, especially from the postmodern view, to reject such labels entirely (Noddings, 1998). Even the relative nature of postmodernism shows that though it is irrational by nature, instruments of reason are freely employed to advance its perspective (Rosenau, 1993, cited in Bazargani & Larsari, 2014).

From Kuhnian philosophy, there is little communication between competing systems since there is not a common measure to address different problems (Kuhn, 1970).

Lack of a common measure should not be at the expense of losing the significance of other theories. However, the anti-foundationalist perspective of postmodernism is an attempt towards completing rather than contradicting several aspects of modernism. Inspired by Kuhn (1970), the present writers are of the thought that a movement (here from modernism to postmodernism) is a sort of metamorphosis—a transformation. But, this transformation is not at the expense of losing the significant tenets of modernism. The most important reason for the shift from modernism to postmodernism is that to the adherents of postmodernisms, the anomalies that modernism could not solve, postmodernists claim they can. However, new movements do not completely succeed in replacing their predecessors, but continue to coexist with them.

Accordingly, Craig (1993) maintains that no change will occur if a paradigm is fully consistent with reality. In other words, if the educators in the related fields agree on the epistemology of an existing paradigm, no shift in paradigm is felt necessary. Accordingly, Craig asserts, to Kuhn (1970), a paradigm can only shift if it is not fully consistent with reality; If it is wrong, it will shift, as reality eventually will prove inconsistent with it. Thus, a paradigm which is fundamentally right cannot be shifted, it only refines, as reality cannot fundamentally contradict it (Craig, 1993).

## IN LIEU OF CONCLUSION

So much ink has been spilled in disfavor with postmodernism. However, it is not a single ideology. In fact, it is an era without a dominant ideology, but a variety of perspectives. Postmodernism updates anarchism (Hughes, 2012). Along the same argument, Hughes goes on to hold "postmodernism exists as an ideology only in the sense that there are core ideas and points of family resemblance amongst the differences" (p. 9). In sum, postmodernism is not compatible with fixed ideology. In a sense, sticking to a fixed ideology is dangerous. It leads to monopoly and the lateralization of power which leads to hegemony. Hegemony—a Marxist concept—"is a Greek term that originally designated the power of a single state over other states in a confederacy" (Litowitz, 1988, p. 519).

However, in Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony, "hegemony requires that the leading group secures its position via willingness and consent of the minority group" (Fontana, 1993, cited in Suarez, 2002, p. 513). And this is exactly the very monopoly of ideology that postmodernists are not compatible with.

More importantly, the epistemology of postmodernism is not in line with modernism. Nonetheless, this does not mean that postmodernists are in an attempt to contradict the past findings. In fact, postmodernists even do not

claim that they provide analytical and empirical knowledge. To them, knowledge, per se, is not going to be discovered analytically, but is going to be constructed through proliferation and juxtaposition. Such a movement rejects the authority of reason and asserts that all claims to objective truth are dangerous. Truth, reason, and knowledge emanated from one person are inherently political and subversive (Leffel, 1996).

Thus, consolidating a flexible subjectivity on the part of individuals can inhibit the formation of a monopoly on the truth. Reality cannot be achieved by delineating a set of objective criteria because unknown variables can intervene and interfere. In sum, no one is forced to pursue a fixed ideology since choices are not made rationally. Besides, scientific knowledge is just one story from many. Scientific knowledge constrains human freedom. Scientific knowledge is inclined toward certainty rather than doubt. In the same line, as Younkins (2000) puts forth, scientific certainty constrains man's freedom and robs people's sense of control. Hence, subjectivity plays a vital role in the survival of a system and deserves far more attention than it has hitherto been given.

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