

## IS AFRICA A POSTMODERN INVENTION?

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The utility of postmodern thinking to the study of Africa continues to be a matter of hot debate. Some authors see postmodernism, particularly colonial discourse analysis, as a threat to well established historical methods for studying African societies.<sup>1</sup> Others draw on postmodern insights while warning of its shortcomings, especially the lack of attention to political and economic structures.<sup>2</sup> This brief discussion cannot fully explore such a complicated subject; rather it is intended as a personal view on some of the key issues at hand.

Postmodernism is not easily encapsulated in one phrase or idea as it is actually an amalgam of often purposely ambiguous and fluid ideas. It represents the convergence of three distinct cultural trends. These include an attack on the austerity and functionalism of modern art; the philosophical attack on structuralism, spear-headed in the 1970s by poststructuralist scholars such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze; and the economic theories of postindustrial society developed by sociologists such as Daniel Bell and Alain Touraine.<sup>3</sup> These various strands were first woven together under the rubric of post-modernism by Jean-François Lyotard, in his book *The Postmodern Condition*, where he summarized postmodernism as above all maintaining "an incredulity toward metanarratives."<sup>4</sup> Postmodernists, he argues, question the assumptions of the modern age, particularly the belief that rational thought and technological innovation can guarantee progress and enlightenment to humanity. They doubt the ability of thinkers from the West either to understand the world or to prescribe solutions for it. The grand theories of the past, whether liberal or Marxist, have been dismissed as products of an age when Europeans and North Americans mistakenly believed in their own invincibility. The metanarratives of such thought are no longer seen as "truth," but simply as privileged discourses that deny and silence competing dissident voices.<sup>5</sup>

Rather than focus on grand theory, with its pretensions to universality, the postmodernists have emphasized the need to uncover previously silenced voices, to explore the relationship between power, language and knowledge and to situate this understanding in its specific locale. Michel Foucault, one of the leading postmodernist (and poststructuralist) thinkers, has called for a more diffuse approach to power, one that emphasizes the link between power, control over knowledge and discourse. He argues that discourse, a historically, socially and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories and beliefs, is the site where meanings are contested and power relations determined.<sup>6</sup> According to Foucault, the ability to control

knowledge and meaning, not only through writing but also through disciplinary and professional institutions, and in social relations, is the key to understanding and exercising power relations in society. Counter hegemonic discourse then becomes the mechanism for challenging the discourse of the dominant and thus of changing society.<sup>7</sup>

The critique of the modern and the focus on language/discourse has led scholars such as Jacques Derrida to call for the dismantling or deconstruction of language/discourse in order to discover the way meaning is constructed and used. Derrida in particular emphasizes Western tendencies toward dualist thinking, whereby the nature and primacy of a term depends on the definition of its opposite (other). These pairs, such as truth/falsity, civilized/uncivilized or man/woman, with their hierarchical couplings, shape our understanding in complex and often unrecognized ways. In order to better understand this process, Derrida and others have called for the critical deconstruction of texts (both written and oral) and attention to the way differences(s), particularly those embedded in such dualisms, are constructed and maintained.<sup>8</sup>

However, the limitations on knowing and on subjective experience have to be acknowledged. The search to understand the construction of social meanings has led postmodernist/post-structuralist scholars to recognize the contingent nature of the subject. As Judith Butler points out, "No subject is its own point of departure." Individual subjects experience and *understand* life within a discursive and material context. This context, particularly the language/discourse that *explains* the concrete experiences of daily life, influences and shapes the way individuals interpret *reality*. The self is thus not simply a reflection of experience (*reality*); it is constituted in complex historical circumstances that must be analyzed and understood as such. This more nuanced approach to the subject does not deny agency (the ability to act). "It is not a repudiation of the subject, but, rather a way of interrogating its construction as a pre-given or foundationalist premise."<sup>9</sup>

These insights have spawned an interest in the construction of identity and the concept of difference(s). The search to discover the way social meanings are constructed has highlighted the importance of difference and the tendency for people to define/identify those whom they see as different in opposition to their own perceived strengths. Postcolonial literary analysts have drawn on these insights to deconstruct the colonial and neocolonial discourse of European and North American scholars and *experts* on the Third World. Most notably, Edward Said has shown how Orientalists in Northern institutions have created a vision of the "irrational,

mysterious and unreliable Orient" which reinforced the superiority of the supposedly rational, scientific West.<sup>10</sup> This critique has flowered in India, where the study of subaltern groups has spawned intricate debates about the nature of colonialism and the utility of colonial discourse analysis.<sup>11</sup> The focus on the hegemonic nature of colonial/neocolonial discourse has shifted of late, and scholars such as Sara Suleri and Homi Bhabha have begun to call for a more interactive approach, one that recognizes the interplay between those who *control* discourse and those who *resist*. For as they point out, even the *powerless* play a role in the making of their own history.<sup>12</sup>

In sum, postmodernist thinkers reject universal, simplified definitions of social phenomena, which, they argue, essentialize reality and fail to reveal the complexity of life as a lived experience. Drawing on this critique, postmodernists have rejected the search for broad generalizations. They emphasize the need for local, specific and historically informed analysis, carefully grounded in both spatial and cultural contexts. Above all, they call for the recognition and celebration of difference(s), the importance of encouraging the recovery of previously silenced voices and an acceptance of the partial nature of all knowledge claims and thus the limits of knowing.

Does this approach to the world have anything to offer those who study Africa? In a very interesting critique, Megan Vaughan argues that colonial/neocolonial discourse analysis, with the exception of a few literary scholars such as Valentine Mudimbe or Anthony Appiah, has aroused little interest among Africanists in or outside the continent.<sup>13</sup> Although young scholars in South Africa are increasingly drawn to this perspective,<sup>14</sup> the explicit use of colonial/neocolonial discourse analysis is indeed limited in Africa. This is no doubt partly due to the desperate plight of many universities on the continent and their continued dependence on Western institutions. It is, after all, not politic to bite the hand that feeds you. More to the point, however, Northern hegemony over scholarly as well as development discourse and practice is well understood and heartily disliked by many Africans. Ife Amadiume's trenchant criticism of Western feminist scholarship on Nigerian women, Tiyanbe Zeleza's attack on the monopoly of Northern feminists over scholarship on African women, vitriolic debates in South Africa over who can or cannot speak for Africa and Africans,<sup>15</sup> and the controversy over Afrocentricity in North America remind us that the construction of Africa by the North/West continues to preoccupy and concern many Africans, both on the continent and in the diaspora. Moreover, this critique is a much needed warning to those who see no need to question the foundational myths of Western society and their impact on African peoples, both today and in the past.

The postmodernist focus on discourse, diversity and subjugated knowledges has inspired greater attention to African voices and to the construction of meaning in African societies. Of course, this is not new. The collection and evaluation of oral evidence has long been central to the study of the African past. Indeed, Vaughan argues that historians

of Africa have discovered the "construction of custom...quite independently of any influence from postmodernist theory."<sup>16</sup> This seems rather unlikely, as new approaches to understanding rarely evolve entirely outside the larger debates of their time. Moreover, while acknowledging that many of these issues intersect with the concerns of colonial discourse theorists, Vaughan dismisses their involvement on the grounds that literary theorists are solely concerned with the written text. Yet scholars drawing on postmodernist (and postcolonial discourse) perspectives have made considerable use of oral as well as written data in Africa.<sup>17</sup> These scholars have in fact sought to draw on postmodern notions of the contingent subject, of authorship and of agency within a contested field of discursively constructed meanings. They have not repudiated established wisdom about oral evidence, but have introduced more scrupulous attention to language/discourse and a greater sensitivity to the role of Western constructs in African lives. Moreover, scholars such as Homi Bhabha and Sara Suleri offer new ways of thinking about the relationship between colonized and colonizers, or the powerful and less powerful, ways that emphasize the interactive nature of all transactions and the multiple and ingenious ways the *oppressed* can resist their domination. This approach has much to offer those studying Africa's past and current dilemmas.

While I believe postmodernist thinking (and postcolonial discourse analysis) offers important insights to the study of Africa, certain caveats must be addressed. First, the critics of colonial and neocolonial discourse cannot escape their own medicine. Africans in the diaspora, whether born on the continent or not, have their own constructions to deal with. Indeed, it is all too easy to romanticize Africa when one is living in the relative comfort of the North. A postmodern skepticism demands that all of us who write, teach or *develop* the continent must examine/deconstruct our own representations/inventions of African *realities*. Northern *experts* on Africa need to be more humble about their claims to *know* Africa, but so do those whose claims to know rest on birth or racial affinity.

Second, the tendency of postmodernists to emphasize discourse, diversity and diffused or capillary power has often led to inattention if not outright disinterest in economic and political structure.<sup>18</sup> Africa, more than any other continent at the current time, reminds us that political and economic power often define people's life chances in cruel and inexorable ways. The need for a synthesis of Gramscian materialism with postmodern thinking is increasingly accepted. Indeed materialist feminists such as Hennessy are calling for a synthesis of materialist and postmodernist approaches.<sup>19</sup> This has much to offer those who study or discuss Africa.

Above all, the search to understand the complex, multileveled *realities* of Africa (and other parts of the world) is not served by a refusal to consider theory, whether because it is seen as foreign or difficult or even irrelevant. Shifts in theory reflect changes in thinking about the world. They cannot be tossed out simply because they conflict with longheld world views. Postmodern theorizing is not, as

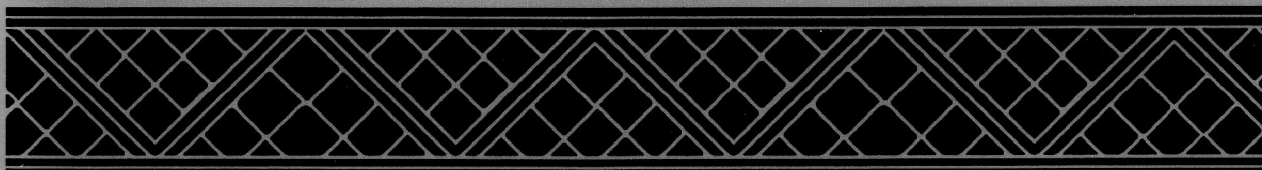
Aijaz Ahmad would have us think, the indulgence of spoiled Western elites.<sup>20</sup> It reflects the fundamental restructuring of the world political economy, and the emergence of a world where new voices, backed by new wealth, are challenging Western hegemony and the universal pretensions of Western theory.<sup>21</sup> Africa is part of these changes, and those who study about and seek to explain Africa cannot place the continent outside the questions of the postmodern era in which we all live. Postmodernism has not invented Africa, but it has much to say about those who claim to know the continent.

## Notes

1. Megan Vaughan, "Colonial Discourse Theory and African History, or has Postmodernism passed us by?", *Social Dynamics*, vol. 20 no. 2, 1994, 1-23; Belinda Bozzoli, "The Discourses of Myth and the Myth of Discourse," *South African Historical Journal*, vol. 26, 1992, 191-197.
2. Frederick Cooper, "Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African history," *African History Review*, vol. 99, no.4, 1994, 1516-1545.
3. Anthony Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism*, Polity Press, Oxford, 1989.
4. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, 1984, pp. xxiii-iv, 5.
5. Some Western scholars, most notably Marxists, reject postmodernism as dangerous and politically naive (Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism*). Others, while sympathetic to Marxism, see postmodernism as an outgrowth of the culture of late capitalism. Fredric Jameson, for example, endorses an approach which draws on the strengths of postmodernism without abandoning political action (Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1991). Some scholars find postmodernism's emphasis on difference and multiplicity useful for their work and not necessary inimical to other approaches (Gyan Prakash, "Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 32, no. 2, 1990, 383-408).
6. Joan Scott, "Deconstructing Equality-versus Difference: or the Use of Poststructuralist Theory of Feminism," *Feminist Studies* vol. 14, no.1, 1988, 36. As Eagleton explains, "'Language' is speech or writing viewed 'objectively,' as a chain of signs without a subject. 'Discourse' means language grasped as utterance, as involving speaking and writing subjects and therefore also, at least potentially, readers and listeners" (T. Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, 1983, 115).
7. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, Tavistock Publications, New York, 1972; *Power/Knowledge*, translated by C. Gordon, The Harvester Press, New York, 1980.
8. J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by G. Spivak, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1976; J. Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1982.
9. Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism'," in J. Butler and J. Scott, eds, *Feminists Theorize the Political*, Routledge Press, London, 1992, p. 9.
10. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Vintage Books, New York, 1979, pp. 9-10.
11. Gyan Prakash, "Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism," *American Historical Review*, vol. 1994, 1475-1490.
12. Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1992, pp. 4-7. Colonial and neo-colonial discourse refers to the writings/discourse of Western/Northern authors on the South; postcolonial discourse refers to the writings of authors in the South, some of whom are based in the North. This terminology is fluid and a continuing matter for debate. Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, Routledge Press, London, 1990.
13. Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992; Valentin Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, James Currey, London, 1988.
14. David Bunn, "The Insistence of Theory: Three Questions for Megan Vaughan," *Social Dynamics*, v. 20, no. 2, 1994, pp. 24-34.
15. Ife Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, Zed Books, London, 1988; Tiyanbe Zeleza, "Gendering African History," *Africa Development*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1993, 99-117; during the conference on Women and Gender in Southern Africa, Jan. 30 -Feb.2, 1991, at the University of Natal, Durban, there was heated debate over who should/could speak for African women; M.K. Asante, *Afrocentricity*, Africa World Press, Trenton, New Jersey, 1988.
16. Vaughan, "Colonial Discourse Theory," p. 13.
17. Christine Sylvester, "'Women' in Rural Producer Groups and the Diverse Politics of Truth in Zimbabwe," in M. Marchand and J. Parpart, eds., *Feminism/Postmodernism/Development*, Routledge Press, London, 1995; "'Urban Women Cooperators', 'Progress,' and 'African Feminism' in Zimbabwe," *Differences*, vol. 3, 1993, pp. 39-62; Clifton Crais, *The Making of the Colonial Order*, Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 1992; David Cohen and E.S. Otieno-Odhiambo, *Siaya: The Historical Anthropology of an African Landscape*, James Currey, London, 1989; J. Parpart, "Gender, Patriarchy and Development in Africa: the Zimbabwean Case," in the *Michigan State University WID Working Paper Series*, forthcoming).
18. Cooper, "Conflict and Connection," p. 1518.
19. Rosemary Hennessy, *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse*, Routledge Press, New York, 1993.
20. Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes and Nations and Literatures*, Verso, London, 1992.
21. Barry Smart, *Postmodernity*, Routledge Press, London, 1993.

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