
Review Essay

African Studies and the Disintegration of Paradigms

Robert H. Bates, *et al.*, *Africa and the Disciplines: The Contribution of Research in Africa to the Social Sciences and Humanities*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, pp.xxiii, 245

Frederick Cooper, *et al.*, *Confronting Historical Paradigms: Peasants, Labour, and the Capitalist World System in Africa and Latin America*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993, pp.viii, 422

Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992; pp.xi, 225

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We live in an age of intellectual uncertainty, of paradigmatic disorder. In virtually all the social science disciplines the master narratives of the past few decades are disintegrating, replaced by various post-isms, from postmodernism to postcoloniality. This turbulence is a product of new currents and ferment in both scholarship and society, of transformations in disciplinary epistemologies and global politics, especially owing to the rise of feminism, the evident crises of both socialism and capitalism in the contending blocs of the old Cold War, and the unravelling of the project of national liberation in the post-colonial world. While no national or regional narrative is immune from fragmentation, it is the decomposition of the dominant 'Western' metascripts that has received most attention, which is frequently credited to the rise of post-modernism in Western academies, a creed now being exported to the rest of the world with the missionary zeal of past Eurocentric discourses. Often overlooked are the challenges and confrontations from African, Asian, and Latin American Studies which have played a vital role in the fragmentation, explosion, and deconstruction of the hegemonic Western paradigms.

In their different ways, the three books explore the contributions of research in Africa to the construction, consumption, and dissolution of Western social science epistemology and knowledge. To the editors of

Africa and the Disciplines the ultimate defense for the study of Africa in Western universities lies in the fact that 'research in Africa has shaped the disciplines and thereby shaped our convictions as to what may be universally true'.¹ This argument, as I will demonstrate later, is deeply flawed.

Each of the writers attempts to establish the contribution of African research to their specific discipline. Predictably, pride of place is given to anthropology, which emerged as the intellectual handmaiden of imperialism and colonialism, to study the 'primitive other', among whom the peoples and societies of the Dark Continent belonged. Moore² traces the development of the discipline from these ignoble beginnings when anthropologists observed and documented the 'customs' of small 'closed', static, 'traditional', 'tribal' communities to the postcolonial Marxist, structuralist, feminist, and postmodernist preoccupations with economy, symbolic systems, gender, and constructions of identities. Experience in Africa, she states, has played a pivotal role in effecting these changes.

The case for the African influence on economics is less obvious. Collier laments that Africa has been ignored by economists, although 'during the 1960s a flood of subsequently eminent economists worked in and on Africa'.³ Despite the limited research, the author enthuses, the African data has helped refine and advance economic models and theories, from the small open economies model and fix-price theory in macroeconomics, to the microeconomic analysis of factor markets, product markets, and household economics, and it offers wonderful opportunities to study the problems of economic transitions, monetary unions, peasant risk behaviour, and micro-enterprises. In political science, Sklar⁴ avers, Africanists have offered distinctive approaches to political modernisation, comparative pluralism, and rational choice theories.

As for African philosophy, Mudimbe and Appiah⁵ contend, it is a field not only connected to American and European philosophy, but it illuminates, and transcends, the divide between analytical and continental philosophy, for it fuses Anglophone and Francophone traditions. It is also interdisciplinary for it combines historical, anthropological, and philosophical analysis, and it raises fundamental questions of the relations between philosophy and

1 Robert, H, Bates, V, Y, Mudimbe, Jean O'Barr, 'Introduction', p.xiv.

2 Sally Falk Moore, 'Changing Perspectives on a Changing Africa: The Work of Anthropology'.

3 Paul Collier, 'Africa and the Study of Economics', p.58.

4 Richard, L, Sklar, 'The African Frontier for Political Science'.

5 V, Y, Mudimbe and Kwame Anthony Appiah, 'The Impact of African Studies on Philosophy'.

culture. Similarly, African art history, according to Blier, exposes the 'fetishes' of Western art discourse, including the models of artistic progress or development, and the privileging of things past and the voice of the artist in the determination of artistic meaning, because the nature of the African data has forced researchers to eschew simplistic evolutionary models and appreciate the complex interactions of past and contemporary productions of art and the social constructions of artistic meaning. Also evident from a study of African art are the limitations of poststructuralist methodologies with their 'deconstructionist proclivity to privilege colonial history and Western perspective (bias) over all others... where self (the coloniser, the collector, the researcher, the writer) is again accorded the principal, privileged, and exclusive voice'.⁶

Finally, studies of African history and literature have called into question all the master narratives of historical development and processes, and literary production, evaluation, and canonicity. In what is perhaps the best essay in the book, Feierman⁷ demonstrates how the phenomenal growth of African history and the expansion of historical knowledge as a whole has led to the splintering of the discipline's epistemology, methodology, focus, scale, and language, thus making it impossible to write human history as a single clear narrative, as a story of civilisation diffusing from the historical heartland of Europe to Africa and other parts of the world. The study of African literature, Miller proclaims, is not only good for multiculturalism, the plural nationalism of contemporary Western societies, but more importantly, it promotes intercultural literacy and theoretical advance, for it 'demands nothing less than a reconsideration of all the terms of literary analysis, starting with the word "literature" itself, and that such a reconsideration is the best thing that can happen to the field'.⁸

Many of these analyses and encounters of Africanist scholarship with the dominant paradigms of Western scholarship are compelling. There can be little doubt that studies of Africa have brought new contexts, methods, insights, and theories that have revolutionised many disciplines, so that the old Eurocentric approaches have lost their paradigmatic prestige and coherence. But the book is still trapped in a Western epistemological framework of reference. Its primary aim is to provide a defense for the study of Africa, not on its own terms, but to promote the marketability of Africanists, by demonstrating that their knowledge is relevant and that it has

6 Suzanne Preston Blier, 'Truth and Seeing: Magic, Custom, and Fetish in Art History', p.57.

7 Steven Feierman, 'African History and the Dissolution of World History'.

8 Christopher, L; Miller, 'Literary Studies and African Literature: The Challenge of Intercultural Literacy', p.217.

already been successfully incorporated in the traditional academic disciplines. In the words of the editors:

*We therefore abstain from claims for equality of access. For our major point is that, to a degree unacknowledged by either side in these debates, the study of Africa is already lodged in the core of the modern university ... Arguments are not privileged by their origins, geographic or cultural; arguments become knowledge when they have been refined by logic and method, and these defenses presently fall in the province of the academic disciplines.*⁹

This tired appeal to universal logic will not do. Left to logic alone anthropologists would probably still be writing about their beloved 'tribal natives'. Lest we forget nationalism and decolonisation in Africa and the civil rights struggles in America did far more than arcane academic disputes to bring African studies to the segregated corridors of North American universities. As Africanists they should know this, and that the production of knowledge about Africa has been imbued by the structured inscriptions of social space, context, systems of power, class, nationality, and gender, and the circuits of publication and circulation. In short, the locations, identities, and ideologies of those who produce, categorise, disseminate and safeguard knowledges on Africa, or any other region, have and will always matter.

It is indicative of the perverse conceit of some Africanists that many of the contributors to this book can discuss the developments of their disciplines in Africa without seriously acknowledging, let alone engaging, the work and critiques of African scholars. Moore shoddily dismisses the searing indictment of anthropology made in the 1960s and 1970s as 'drearily conventionalised vituperation'.¹⁰ African anthropologists are only mentioned in the concluding remarks, prefaced by the rhetorical question: 'And what will be the involvement of African scholars?'.¹¹ Strange that she seems unaware of such renowned African anthropologists as Mafeje and Magubane whose studies are not even cited in the references!

There is a tendency to assume that Africa's contribution to the disciplines merely lies in its peculiarities and capacity to provide validation to theories already developed elsewhere. Collier and Sklar are quite explicit on this. 'Africa is a gold mine to economists', Collier declares, 'because its economic history has been so extreme: booms, busts, famines, migrations', not to mention its diversity which makes it 'ideally suited to the comparative approach which is the economist's best substitute for the controlled

9 Bates, Mudimbe, and O'Barr, p.xii.

10 Moore, *op.cit.*, p.9.

11 *Ibid.*, p.33.

experiment. Until recently this potential has not been realised¹² Collier has little to say about political economy, or traditions and writers critical to his neo-classical gospel, whose work has been influential in the analysis of African economic development and change. And predictably, hardly any African economist is mentioned. Sklar, in what is possibly the worst chapter in the book, asserts that Africanist scholars could provide more meaningful contributions to political science by examining problems that are specifically or generically African, such as 'parasitic statism, militarism, dictatorship, public corruption, the insufficient accountability of public officials, ineffective political socialisation, and differential incorporation of ethnic groups resulting in conflict, among many others'.¹³ Surely, these problems are not confined to Africa, are they? If the pathologisation of African economic and political behaviour and processes is all that Africanists can offer to economics and political science then they ought to close shop.

Sklar also underscores one of the enduring problems of Africanists scholarship, that of language. He asks:

*is linguistic expertise a necessary condition of genuine Afrocentric achievement? I think not; very few political scientists in African studies, apart from those who speak an African language as their mother tongue, have linguistic skills that would be adequate for the purpose of unassisted research in an African language. In this regard, the field of African studies is unlike either Asian or Middle eastern studies. In African political studies, research-grade proficiency in an African language is rarely anticipated or attained by individuals who are not native speakers of the language concerned.*¹⁴

The problem: there are too many African languages! This is like a scholar of Japan or Germany saying he can't master Japanese or German because there are too many Asian or European languages. An American scholar studying Germany without knowing German would not be taken too seriously by experts in the field. The privileging of European languages in African studies is a reflection of relations of dominance of Africa by the West and enhances the capacity of Western scholars for intellectual accumulation, appropriation, and domination in African studies. Expressing and interpreting African histories, values, and modalities from the margins of African contexts, in imported languages and modes of understanding rooted in a Western epistemological order raises fundamental questions about the

12 Collier, *op.cit.*, p.58.

13 Sklar, *op.cit.*, p.85.

14 *Ibid.*, p.100.

constructions, relevance, believability, and legitimacy of theories, concepts, and beliefs about Africa.

The contributions in *Confronting Historical Paradigms* traverse much the same ground. They discuss the rethinking of historical interpretation and paradigm among Africanists and Latin Americanists in the 1980s and early 1990s. Half of the essays are new, while the other half consists of reprints, including Cooper's and Isaacman's well-known and comprehensive bibliographic surveys first published in *African Studies Review*.

In Chapter I Stern echoes many of the points made by Feierman concerning the apparent splintering of historical knowledge due to the confrontations with Third World regional histories, the expansion of the epistemological boundaries of history with the rise of the feminist and social history movements, all of which placed the discipline's old objectivist, androcentric, and eurocentric paradigms on the defensive. But this picture of extreme fragmentation, Stern correctly argues, has been overstated. Alongside the apparent chaos, trends towards narrowness and specialisation:

there also developed a process of 'reverberation' — conversations within and across specialised fields and across disciplines; imperfect trackings of historiographical shift and debate; echoes of the tussles with paradigm, method, theory, and grand interpretation in other camps. Much of the 'new' scholarship of the 1960s and 1970s self-consciously wrestled with 'traditional' paradigms of historical research and interpretation ... Reverberation, an important process of intellectual network and conversation, debate and echo, travel and refraction, does not quite fit the bipolar scheme of unified community versus fragmented tribalism. It mediated, however, imperfectly, the specialised balkanisation that is the bane of virtually all fields of contemporary knowledge. It allowed for convergences within a context of difference.¹⁵

Historians of Africa and Latin America, he maintains, were not only in the forefront of wrestling with the stereotypes, silences, and misinterpretations of 'traditional' western historiography, they also conversed with each other, which led to fruitful convergences of theme and interpretation, especially on the questions of the capitalist world system, labour processes, and peasantries.

Two of the papers test the utility of world-system approaches as overarching explanations for developments and trends in Latin America and

15 Steve, J. Stern, 'Africa, Latin America, and the Splintering of Knowledge: From Fragmentation to Reverberation', p.9.

Africa. Stern's other paper specifically seeks to probe the promise and limits of Wallerstein's theories on labour relations in Latin America,¹⁶ while Cooper offers a broad overview of the paradigms that have dominated the study of African economic history, from modernisation, to dependency, and modes of production.¹⁷

Before subjecting Wallerstein's world-system paradigm to critical evaluation, Stern outlines the development and consumption of dependency perspectives in Latin American studies, which antedated Wallerstein's formulation, hence the coolness with which the latter's propositions were received in the region. Using the cases of silver and sugar, he demonstrates that Wallerstein's tripartite division of international labour— free labour in the core, sharecropping in the semiperiphery, and forced labour in the periphery is very misleading on both descriptive and explanatory grounds. A more satisfactory model would have to integrate what he calls the three great motors: the European world-system, popular strategies of resistance and survival within the periphery, and the mercantile and elite interests joined to American 'centres of gravity'.¹⁸

Cooper's essay, first published in 1981, still makes interesting reading. It painstakingly traces, periodises, and critiques, on empirical, theoretical, and ideological grounds, the three major paradigms in African economic history, beginning with, in the euphoric 1960s, neo-classical economics and its modernisation prescriptions, against which followers of the dependence, underdevelopment and world system approaches railed with structuralist and moral outrage in the 'radical' 1970s, before they themselves were found wanting at the turn of the sobering 1980s by Marxists with their articulating modes of production. These critiques, and Cooper's refreshing reconstruction of periodisations, trends, and processes in African economic history from the pre-colonial, to the colonial, and post-colonial eras confirms that none of these paradigms can, on its own, provide an adequate understanding of the evolution of Africa's economies and their place in the world economy. What is needed is creative dialogue between them, and devising comparative approaches that are sensitive to the particularities of time, culture, perception, and struggles. In his postscript written specifically for this collection he adds the significance of incorporating the analysis of gender and power. And he cautions against the posturing of what he calls 'post-something scholarship', from poststructuration, postmodernism to

16 Steve, J. Stern, 'Feudalism, Capitalism, and the World-System in the Perspective of Latin America and the Caribbean'.

17 Frederick Cooper, 'Africa the World Economy'.

18 Stern, 'Feudalism, Capitalism, and the World System in the Perspective of Latin America', p.56.

post-Marxism",¹⁹ a subject on which Appiah, examined below, has a lot to say.

Despite their differences, the papers by Stern and Cooper are both critical of grand explanations, and offer richly textured histories of the complex and changing interconnections between structure and agency, world system and local process. Only theoretical models and paradigms that integrate these levels of analysis, that combine specific and broader narratives, can describe and explain the historical construction and impact of the capitalist world system, and the development of labour systems and peasantries.

Isaacman²⁰ and Roseberry²¹ examine the historiographies of Africa and Latin American peasantries, respectively. It is incredible to recall, as Isaacman shows, how invisible peasants were in African studies until quite recently, their existence ignored in all the three paradigms discussed by Cooper. Indeed, many Africanists openly doubted the analytical value of the concept of peasant. Only at the turn of the 1980s were African peasants finally admitted to the hallowed theoretical halls of academia, thanks to the deepening agrarian crisis, the collapse of the nationalist project, and the apparent intensification or resurgence of rural struggles. Scholars then began listening to peasant voices, reconstructing their histories and daily lives, and deciphering their organisation of work and struggle against the external forces of state power and exploitative markets and in response to their own internal divisions and hierarchies of gender, class, and ethnicity. The peasant studies that Isaacman chronicles have assisted in rupturing the narratives of both nationalist and eurocentric historiographies.

Latin American peasants lost their invisibility much earlier than their African counterparts partly because of intense debates after the Second World War about agrarian reform and rural unrest among policy makers, intellectuals, and activists. Roseberry argues that the agrarian question was posed simplistically and inappropriately, for the analysis was not conducted on the peasants' own terms, but often through the borrowed terms of Chayanov and Lenin and other writers on the agrarian question in Europe, so that the Latin American peasants often disappeared 'into the structural categories of comfortable, middle, and poor peasants'.²² The generalised appropriation of European contexts, ideas, and models gave rise to analyses and typologies that were historically and sociologically empty. Only in the 1970s and 1980s, Roseberry tells us, did systematic, detailed, sophisticated,

19 Frederick Cooper, 'Postscript: Africa and the World Economy', p.193.

20 Allen, F. Isaacman, 'Peasants and Rural Social Protest in Africa'.

21 William Roseberry, 'Beyond the Agrarian Question in Latin America'.

22 *Ibid.*, p.334.

and regionally specific studies of rural life begin to appear. This reflected the expansion of historical research, intellectual fatigue with the transhistorical paradigms of the earlier literature, and the influence of work from other regions, such as James Scott's work on Asia which provided a model for understanding peasant consciousness and political activity.²³

The Latin Americanists working on peasants, argues Mallon in the last chapter, have much to learn from their Africanist counterparts on how to incorporate gender and ethnicity in their studies, while the Africanists can learn something about reconnecting the specific realities of peasants to the broader cultural, social, and economic contexts in which rural cultivators produce and reproduce their lives. This is only one of the potential reverberations between African and Latin American studies. There have already been many reverberations, including the expositions and critiques of modernisation, dependency, and modes of production theories. There are many embodiments of these intellectual ties, the most renowned being perhaps Walter Rodney, a Guyanese, who wrote one of the most influential books in African historiography, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*.²⁴ Mallon proposes four areas 'where future dialogue may prove particularly rich: culture and politics, the meaning of nationalism in 'Third World' areas, ethnicity and the construction of power relations, and gender and generation.²⁵ These areas, she suggests, will yield more meaningful research than the decadent and depoliticised preoccupations of postmodernism and other post-isms.

The challenge for Africanists and Latin Americanists, Mallon concludes, is to write complex, meaningful histories without recreating

*the frozen dualisms of the past: before capitalism and after capitalism; before rationality and after rationality; before class struggle and after class struggle. To maintain some sense of narrative line without becoming linear, to maintain a sense of diachronic process and transition without becoming dualistic, to rebuild a sense of explanation and causation without silencing important stories ... to make our scripts more flexible and dynamic by rewriting the plots and main cast of characters to include, alongside class, questions of culture, colonialism, politics, ethnicity, and gender and generation.*²⁶

23 James, C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1976, and *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985.

24 Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, London, Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1972.

25 Florencia, E. Mallon, 'Dialogue Among the Fragments: Retrospect and Prospect', p.386.

26 *Ibid.*, p.395.

This agenda is very demanding, but essential.

The collection itself demonstrates the considerable advances that have already been made in the studies of Africa and Latin America, which have contributed to the fragmentation of the eurocentric approaches, while at the same time encouraging new lines of intellectual dialogue, from which broader and more inclusive theories, paradigms, and narratives can be constructed. But the analyses do not always match the declared intent. None of the authors, for example, pays more than lip service to gender analysis. And as in the previous book, this is essentially a conversation *among* Northern academics, recounting *their* generational encounter with Africa and Latin America. To paraphrase Roseberry's critique that the agrarian question in Latin America was posed about, not by, the peasantry, in this book questions are posed about, not by, Africans and Latin Americans.

Appiah provides an African's voice. His book, *In My Father's House*, deals with many of the same issues examined in the last two books, but in a more satisfying manner. The book combines the engaging readability of a personal memoir and the detached analysis of intellectual trends, at once a reflective essay and an academic treatise, provocative and persuasive, written in prose that is both evocative and precise. The first two chapters begin with a perceptive interrogation of race, noting the different conceptions among Africans and African-Americans, and between the proponents of what he calls intrinsic and extrinsic racism in the world at large. Modern genetics, he points out, has conclusively demonstrated that there are no underlying racial essences among human beings, so that racial discourses and theories are socially-constructed, spurious ideologies. He then proceeds to argue that Africa is not a primordial fixture, but an invented reality, and Africans are not moulded from the same clay of racial and cultural homogeneity. To quote him: 'Whatever Africans share, we do not have a common traditional culture, common languages, a common religious or conceptual vocabulary ... we do not even belong to a common race.'²⁷

Appiah celebrates the diversity, complexity, richness, and contingency of African social and cultural life. This constitutes an essential part of his argument, developed in the next two chapters, against the nativist rhetoric of unproblematised, transhistorical solidarities, which in the African context is articulated most loudly in the essentialist and celebratory fantasies of Afrocentricism. This narrative of African differences, multiple realities, experiences, possibilities, and agencies can be read as a confrontation with the totalising narratives of both African nationalism and European imperialism, with their dualistic and polarised images of marginality and dominance, subjugation and autonomy. In this context he has much to say

27 Appiah, p.26.

about literature and language as markers of nations, ethnicities, cultures, and identities. To go beyond nativist hand waving against Western literary discourse, which is often trapped in the epistemological and ideological matrix of that very discourse, it is necessary, he insists, to historicise the analytical terms of 'literature', 'nation', and 'culture' through which the contestation of Eurocentric evaluations and affirmation of Afrocentric authenticity is conducted.

As he puts it:

Inasmuch as the most ardent of Africa's cultural nationalists participates in naturalising — universalising — the value-laden categories of 'literature' and 'culture', the triumph of universalism has, in the face of a silent nolo contendere, already taken place. The Western emperor has ordered the natives to exchange their robes for trousers: their act of defiance is to insist on tailoring them from homespun material. Given their arguments, plainly, the cultural nationalists do not go far enough: they are blind to the fact that their nativist demands inhabit a Western architecture.²⁸

This analytical brush unravelling differences beneath the imposed uniformities of Eurocentric and Afrocentric thought is extended to discussions of philosophy in Chapter 5. African philosophical traditions, he maintains, are no more homogeneous than those of any other continent. There is no central body of ideas that Africans have shared across time and space. African philosophy should not be reduced to the pristine wisdom of folk philosophy, or ethnophilosophy, which after all, exists in every culture. Thus the temptation to distil an African conceptual essence, or to impose and impute the philosophical doctrines of some European thinker is unrewarding. Giving the example of trying to find evidence of Cartesian dualism among the Akan, Appiah scoffs:

I do not myself believe that any of Ghana's Akan peoples were dualist. But I do not think that it makes sense to say they are monists either: like most Westerners — all Westerners, in fact, without philosophical training — most simply do not have a view about the issue at all. For, as I have argued already, the examination and systematisation of concepts may require us to face questions that, prior to reflection, simply have not been addressed. What the Fanti have is a concept — okra — ripe for philosophical work. What is needed is someone who does for this concept the sort of work that Descartes did for the concept

28 *Ibid.*, p.60.

*of the mind, and, in doing this, like Descartes, this Fanti philosopher will be covering new territory.*²⁹

African philosophers have their work cut out for them. While they may derive conceptual and methodological inspiration from ethnophilosophy and Western philosophy, to be meaningful their texts and discourses have to critically engage Africa's contemporary conditions and challenges, an intellectual task neither ethnophilosophy nor Western philosophy is equipped to undertake.

Unfortunately, Appiah's analysis occasionally loses its clarity and relapses into the old, discredited paradigms. The tensions and ambivalences are most evident in Chapter 6. He is only too aware that the binary oppositions of tradition and modernity in describing contemporary society are false, or at least simplistic, as all such dualisms are, but his analytical agenda, the explication of differences in the cognitive orders of Africa and the West leads him to employ a schema incorporating these very dichotomies. And so he compares the different roles of religion and the modes of thought in the traditional oral cultures of Africa, although the examples are largely drawn from his Asante homeland, and the industrialised literate societies of the West. A considerable part of the chapter is in fact taken up by a rather esoteric assessment of the analogies between traditional religion and modern science as explanatory systems and social organisations of inquiry. Why not compare 'traditional' Africa with 'traditional' Europe, or 'modern' Africa with 'modern' Europe? In an interesting anecdote about the melange of ceremonies performed at his sister's wedding the point is made effectively that many Africans do indeed lead complex, fluid, and syncretic lives that defy the simple polarities of tradition and modernity.

In the next chapter on postmodernism and postcoloniality Appiah regains his balance. He argues, quite persuasively, that postmodernism's fetishisation of fragmentation, subjectivities, and multiplication of distinctions 'flows from the need to clear oneself a space; the need that drives the underlying dynamic of cultural modernity'.³⁰ He elaborates:

[This], surely, has to do with the sense in which art is increasingly commodified. To sell oneself and one's products as art in the marketplace, it is important above all, to clear a space in which one is distinguished from other producers and products — and one does this by the construction and marking of differences. It is this that accounts for a certain intensification of the long-standing individualism of

29 *Ibid.*, p.100.

30 *Ibid.*, p.145.

*post-Renaissance art production: in an age of mechanical reproduction, aesthetic individualism — the characterisation of the artwork as belonging to the oeuvre of an individual — and the absorption of the artist's life into the conception of the work can be seen precisely as modes of identifying objects for the market.*³¹

Oppositionality to the past and the trivialisation of current struggles makes post-modernist discourse non-threatening, thus ensuring its marketability.

I would add, following Aijaz Ahmad,³² that the reactionary anti-humanisms of postmodernism and the other post-isms of contemporary avant-gardist thought in the West reflect a specific political and ideological conjuncture, the global offensive of the Right, and the global retreat of the Left. Thus postmodernism, championed as the end of metanarratives has itself become a metanarrative. Like the modernisms it denounces, its ambitions are universalistic, as it seeks to force narratives from different societies with alternative times, histories, and causalities into its linear, Eurocentric, and depoliticised tunnel. Some of these societies being catapulted into post-modernity, we need to remember, were until recently seen as pre-modern backwaters!

Postmodernism of course claims to thrive on concessions to difference. So for the old Third World postcoloniality has become the operative discourse. As one critic has astutely observed, while postcolonial theory, like postmodernism, 'sought to challenge the grand march of Western historicism with its entourage of binaries (self-other, metropolis-colony, centre-periphery, etc.), the term 'post-colonialism' nonetheless re-orientes the globe once more around a single, binary opposition: colonial/post-colonial'.³³ Apart from the advantages of its dubious spatiality and problematic temporality, the term offered the intellectual gatekeepers of Western hegemony a respite from the terrorising terms of 'neo-colonialism' and the 'Third World'.³⁴

Thus postcoloniality recentres global history around Europe, privileging colonialism as the crucible through which the societies and cultures of Africa, Asia, and Latin America were constituted, thereby obfuscating their diverse histories and trajectories, including their very varied experiences with imperialism and colonialism itself. The discourses of postmodernism and postcoloniality arrogantly affirm, as Carole Boyce Davies puts it, 'that

31 *Ibid.*, p.143.

32 Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, London, New York, Verso, 1992:192-5.

33 Anne McClintock, 'The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term "Post-Colonialism"', *Social Text*, Vol.10, No.2 & 3, 1992:85.

34 Ella Shohat, 'Notes on the "Post-Colonial"', *Social Text*, Vol.10, No.2 & 3, 1992:99-103.

the West has already invested everything, done everything, experienced everything or thought everything worthwhile, and therefore all we need do is sound the last posts as the world collapses into itself.³⁵ In a poignant phrase, she dismisses these totalising and homogenising 'posts' as 'nothing but phallic erections without the necessary power to sustain them, and so called for the ways they block new and productive work'.³⁶ Organising postcolonialism around the binary axis of time, rather than power telescopes into invisibility the continuing ravages of imperialism in the world today, and marginalises the crucial narratives of gender and class in the continued asymmetric configurations of power globally, regionally, and within nations.

Appiah echoes many of these critiques. He argues, echoing Blier, that locating artistic and cultural productions in post-colonial Africa (here the term post-colonial is used in the restricted historical sense of the period immediately following the end of colonial rule) in the depoliticised matrix of postcoloniality and postmodernism is misleading. Taking the example of African literature, he demonstrates that the novels written after independence

*are novels of deligitimation: rejecting the Western imperium, it is true, but also rejecting the nationalist project of the postcolonial national bourgeoisie. And, so it seems to me, the basis for that project of deligitimation is very much not the postmodernist one: rather, it is grounded in an appeal to an ethical universal: indeed it is based, as intellectual responses to oppression in Africa are largely based, in an appeal to a certain simple respect for human suffering, a fundamental revolt against the endless misery of the last thirty years.*³⁷

In short, while these writings challenge earlier legitimating narratives, it challenges them 'in the name of humanism ... and on that ground it is not an ally for Western postmodernism but an agonist, from which I believe postmodernism may have something to learn'.³⁸

The book ends where it began with a reconsideration of African identities in the contemporary world. Appiah argues passionately for the construction of a new Pan-Africanism, one based on shared popular struggles against imperialist exploitation and visions for a more humane world, a Pan-Africanism that transcends the superficial entreaties of state relations. 'African unity, African identity', he writes, 'need securer

35 Carole Boyce Davies, 'Uprooting the "Posts": From Post-Coloniality to Uprising Discourses', paper presented to Conference on 'Reconstructing the Study and Meaning of Africa', 21st Annual Spring Symposium, Centre for African Studies, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 8-9 April, 1994, p.2-3.

36 *Ibid.*, p.3.

37 *Ibid.*, p.152.

38 *Ibid.*, p.155.

foundations than race',³⁹ and he believes that 'an African identity is coming into being ... that this identity is a new thing; that it is the product of a history',⁴⁰ that in forging it we must not overlook the continent's multifarious communities and cultures, or subsume what Carole Boyce Davies would call the 'uprising discourses' of gender, ethnicity, and class. African intellectuals can contribute significantly to the construction of empowering African identities by developing and sharing discourses that are open-ended and reflect the continent's conditions and realities, all too often obscured in the sweeping, totalising and reductive discourses and paradigms imported from the West. The struggle indeed continues.

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39 *Ibid.*, p.176.

40 *Ibid.*, p.174.