

Postmodernism

With the end of colonialism and the emergence of a seemingly new world order, there raised a demand that research be useful and relevant, indicating that knowledge for its own sake was insufficient. As a result of this, what emerged was a new focus on 'development' and 'modernization' in the form of postmodernism. In these changing times, anthropology has come into contact with a variety of evolving concepts, including hybridists, montage, fluidity, and deconstruction. The question remains, how these concepts reflect the social, cultural and political changes that are occurring in study of anthropology today. Postmodernism is an intellectual movement that promotes itself as the 'antithesis' of modernism, resulting from the intensification, radicalisation, or transformation of the processes of modernity. (Barfield, 368) The term was introduced in the late 1940's, however, the turn towards, if not the origin of postmodernism in anthropology, can be traced to a single publication: *Writing Culture* (1986). It consisted of contributions from nine scholars, edited by Clifford and Marcus, and attempted to sketch out the basic premise of the post-modern perspective. (Harris, 153) Anthropologists are forced to contend with the changes created by postmodernism in a variety of ways, beginning with the challenge to anthropological authority. It is felt by many that it is incredibly arrogant for anthropologists to assume that they have both the capacity and mandate to dissect, interpret and describe the lives of people in other cultures, given the power and wealth imbalance of the colonial past, leaving the 'other' unable to speak for him/herself. This argument finds itself in the whole 'West vs. Rest' spectrum, claiming that because of the nature in which traditional ethnologist were carried out, ex. Colonial, Anglo- whites, etc., that today, despite the multicultural and ethnically aware world that we live in, that anthropologists are not capable of unbiased and accurately producing ethnographic work. In part, there concern is founded. To my knowledge, there rests no undocumented peoples on the planet, as such, ethnologies today focus on sub-group structure and societal dynamics. Depending on the position that ones takes the results can be very different. An example of this is the anthropological work that is done on Arab women. Arab women in the west are often perceived as voiceless victims of violence and inequality. Though some do not enjoy the same level of 'social polices' that women in the West do, and in some cases women remain voiceless victims of violence as do some in the West, they maintain a strong family network which in many cases for over sees concerns about old age pensions and food stamp programs. There has also been the increase in dialogical and polyvocal approaches, insisting that ethnologies become a joint venture, with the anthropologist relinquishing their voice to provide equal room for the voices of the 'other'. Ethnologies therefore, when done correctly, should act as a hybrid, joining the words of the ethnologist with the voices and experiences of the informants and observers. Despite the increasing acceptance of ethnologies as pieces of research, another feature is the emergence of the ethnography as a piece of fiction. (Barrett, 152) One of the more significant developments of postmodernism has been the focus on ethnography as a product of writing, which should be looked at as fictional, not in the sense of make believe or fairytale, but in the sense created or fabricated. Thus, a result of being written from the perspective of the ethnologist, perception takes away from reality and fact, leaving interpretation and in some case, fictitious misrepresentations. Next, postmodernism shifts the anthropological focus on interpretation and meaning rather than causality and behavior. Culture is seen as a system of ideas and symbols, with a complex of meanings, and ideally, it is the job of the anthropologist to join forces with the 'other' and interpret it. This is where deconstruction and hermeneutics come into play, as discussed by Derrida. By helping in the break down structures to illuminate hidden dimensions, this enables the investigator to comprehend the manner in which natives decode and understand their own texts. More specifically, deconstruction involves breaking down 'essences' such as the family, female, and male into their individual components in order to illuminate the embedded dimensions of ideology and power. (Barrett, 153) There has also been a trend away from grand theories and generalizations. Condoning meta-narratives, or meta-histories through which all things can be interpreted or represented, along with universal and eternal truths, if they exist at all, can not be specified. (Blackwell, 45) Instead, postmodernists are meant to emphasize the particular and individual 'other' (or subjects of study) and feel at ease with the image of social structure that is fragmented or disjointed. (Barrett, 153) As a compliment to the inadequacy of positivism, there has been a renewed emphasis on relativism. Relativism, a doctrine pioneered by Boas, emphasizes the diversity and uniqueness of each and every culture. (Barrett, 153) A sort of heterogeneity of cultures, emphasizing difference, promoting the lives of the other, rather than sameness, as a reality of the multicultural global planet that we find ourselves in today. This in many way seems like the 'politically correct' approach, attempting to put the wrongs of the past right through a campaign of valorisation and glorification of the 'other'. Consequently, what we have seen as a result of the emergence of the post-modern ideologies is the creation of author-saturated rather than data-saturated ethnologies and secondly, the emergence of postmodernism as an empirical entity. Before postmodernism, ethnology was judged by the quality of the data and the elegance and incisiveness of the analysis. Since then, it has become the author(s) who take the centre stage. Anthropologists have moved from insisting that the anthropologist stay out of the ethnology to having the anthropologist's presence dominate the ethnography. (Nader, 153) This strikes me as being quite odd. Much criticism about ethnologies is that the presence of the ethnologist has a detrimental effect on the results of the study and that the perceptions obtained and recorded must be seen as fictional, with the expansion of the ethnology being seen and a literary piece. How then can this fascination with anthropological writers be explained?

In many cases, it is not a matter of the writer being a part of the study itself, but rather playing a part in the story. Traditional ethnologies were quantitatively based, and in many cases for the purpose of research. Now, there is more of a concern towards entertainment and to a certain extent, telling the tale of a people to the reader, as such, the author must engage in the lives of the 'other' as to make it appealing to his reader, and pay the bills. Finally, a great deal of debate in the field of anthropology between those attracted and repelled by the postmodernists perspective, is the feasibility and fluidity of the post-modern perspective and its influence. The implication is that postmodernism is merely another theoretical perspective dreamed up by jaded (or perhaps mischievous) academics, with little connection to people's lives. (Barrett, 154) Though this argument has stood the test of time in regards to most theories and theorists, this is not the case with postmodernism. Paralleling the development of postmodernism in anthropological thought has been extensive, revolutionary changes in the empirical world. (Barrett, 154) Postmodernism changed the way in which anthropologists conduct research and compile studies by changing the environments in which they work. It created new expectations and standards which in many ways were radically different from those introduced by traditional and modern anthropologists. Although postmodernism has undeniably had a significant impact on anthropology, the wide spread acceptance and application has been hesitant. In general, it does maintain some fundamental applications that are essential to the development of anthropological thought, but is so different from what has been traditional been taught that it may take awhile for the concepts to be accepted. 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