

POSTMODERNISM AND THE OBJECTIVITY OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES: AN INTERROGATIVE CONVERSATION WITH AUGUSTINE ATABOR

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This very short piece is a succinct interrogative conversation of a thesis canvassed by Augustine A. Atabor in his article, “The Question of Objectivity, its Implications for the Social Sciences in the Era of Postmodernism: Africa in Perspective”, published in the *Special Issue* of this journal on *Postmodernism and African Philosophy* (Volume 3, Number 2, July-December 2014, pp.50-61).

The article argues that postmodernism repudiates the objectivity of the social sciences or to use the author’s words: “The paper accentuates the difficulty with postmodernism which tries to deny the possibility of objective truth in the social sciences” (2014, 50). By objectivity or objective truth, the author refers to “the state or quality of being true even outside of a subject’s individual feelings, imaginations or interpretations... the ability to judge fairly without bias or external influence that occurs in a phenomenological way” (2014, 53). Necessarily, postmodernism has a lot to do with objectivity. As Atabor rightly underscores, postmodernism ultimately calls for “a philosophical and ontological intellectual practice that is non-dogmatic, tentative, and non-ideological” (2014, 54) and as such subjects all standpoints and conceptual schemes that claim to be the *sole universal standard, validator or possessor of objectivity/objective truth* to incessant questioning.

Given the fact that objectivity is very crucial to all forms of human inquiries and the attention postmodernism has attracted over the years, the article is no doubt an interesting and thought-provoking philosophical piece. The author was able to establish that there is a necessary link between postmodernism and the question of objectivity; and that postmodernism’s attack on objectivity has implications for the social sciences as well as Africa. However, the crucial question I have for the author is whether the rejection of the possibility of objective truth by postmodernism is an attack on the social sciences? Is postmodernism a vituperator or vindicator of the social sciences? Atabor’s position in his article is likely to mislead an uninformed reader to conclude that postmodernism is a vituperator of the social sciences but the converse is *more* correct. A good grasp of *when* the objectivity of the social sciences came under attack, *who* attacked it and *why* will make this point vivid.

The question and quest for objective truth is perhaps as old as the human person. Probably, the quest arose as a result of apparent disagreements/conflicting opinions of people about the same phenomenon. Traditionally, different cultures and different areas of human endeavor do have a conventional method for discovering the truth about a given issue. No tradition, culture, or field of study proclaims its own conventional method as the *sole legitimate* method for the discovery of truth.

Everything was initially studied under the umbrella of philosophy. The humanities were held in high esteem. Then came the modern period and everything changed!

The trail blazing scientific discoveries and successes of Natural Philosophy (now Natural Sciences) during the renaissance-enlightenment-modern period led to the proclamation of the method of the natural sciences as the sole legitimate method for the discovery of objective truth anywhere and everywhere. In other words, whatever is objective must be scientific. And for anything to be scientific it must be positivistic; it must be a product of empirical observation, verification, experimentation, prediction and logico-mathematical explanation. Humbled by the achievements of the natural sciences, all disciplines surrendered their methods and bowed to the draconic rules of positivism. Hence, the emergence of the “logy” disciplines: Sociology, the scientific study of society; Anthropology, the scientific study of man; Psychology...! It was therefore in the *modern period* (the *when*) that the *scientific community* (the *who*) deny the possibility of the objectivity of the social sciences because they do not strictly employ the final arbiter of objectivity, the *scientific method* (the *how*) in their investigation of social phenomenon. Despite forcing the social sciences to *scientize*, the scientific community still insists that *objectivity* is outside the reach of the social sciences because it is by nature a value-laden discipline.

From a philosophical perspective, it is more accurate to describe postmodernism as “against modernism” and not “after modernism”. Historically, the period after the modern period of philosophy is treated as the contemporary period. Postmodernism is therefore not a historical period of philosophy but a philosophical mode of thinking that seeks to deconstruct the intolerant, imperialistic and arrogant god of the modern period, *The Scientific Method!* The ultimate aim of postmodernism is to liberate all disciplines and cultures from the strangulating hold and suffocating cage of Eurocentric conception of *Science/Reason*. Postmodernism denies the existence of an objective truth that is universal, cross-cultural and eternal. It argues that there is no objective truth that is insulated from internal influences, even in the natural sciences. And the philosophical apostles of postmodernism – Quine, Kuhn, Feyerabend, Rorty – have variously shown that every truth, including *scientific truth* is relative to a given social or intellectual community, at a given point in time. Thus the quest for objective truth that is insulated from all influences (cultural, social, ideological, psychological) is a scam. Everything is relative to a standpoint and objectivity is a product of “Solidarity” or “Consensus” reached by the leading authorities in a given intellectual or social community at a given point in time. These authorities are individuals whose idiosyncrasies inevitable have bearing on their thoughts.

Sequel to the foregoing, I posit that: first, postmodernism is the *vindicator* not the *vituperator* of the social sciences. Second, the claim of Atabor that “the attack of postmodernism on positivism is an attack aimed at the possible claims of the objectivity by the social sciences” (2014, 55) is inaccurate. Third, while “Modernism encourages the universalization of Western values” (2014, 58) postmodernism

encourages the relativization of all values, extols cross-cultural borrowing and challenges intellectuals in all cultures, including Africa, to seek and devise solutions to the diverse problems affecting human beings in the contemporary world using any fruitful method. Fourth, postmodernism sees objectivity in the social sciences and indeed in all the sciences as a matter of “compatibility” or “solidarity” with the “consensus” reached by the works of leading authorities in a given intellectual community at a given point in time. Last, globalization today is more or less the universalization of Western values because it is riding on the wheels of modernism, and an ideal global ideology will only be possible if it emerge as a product of consensus reached by the views of leading authorities in all regional intellectual and social communities that make up the globe.

Relevant Literature

1. ATABOR, Augustine A. “The Question of Objectivity, its Implications for the Social Sciences in the Era of Postmodernism: Africa in Perspective”, [Filosofia Theoretica...Special Issue: Postmodernism and African Philosophy], pp50-61, Vol 3., No 2., July-December 2014. Paperback.