

On the Legacy of Postmodern Approach to History in the 21st Century

Karin Sabolíková, Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice, Slovakia¹

Abstract

Postmodernism is traditionally thought to be anti-historical, and history is thought to be one of the prejudices that postmodernism has claimed to dissolve. With respect to the postmodernist approach to history, writing about history is therefore controversial or according to others it is without moving ahead. On the contrary, many postmodernists believe that a postmodernist idea of history provides the only basis for the kind of knowledge required by global society in 21st century. The purpose of this paper is to outline the characteristic features of the postmodernist movement, to explain its confrontation with history, to map its critique of the traditional practice of history and to survey the legacy of postmodernism for our understanding of history today.

Keywords: postmodernism, history, global history

Postmodernism

Postmodernism as a term or something of an umbrella term does not have a single definition. The term has been used differently across different disciplines from country to country. There is no synoptic depiction of postmodernism left by leading figures, such as Lyotard, Foucault, Baudrillard, Derrida, Lacan, Rorty, Kristeva and Schrag (Burbules 1995). It has been known as a movement, a new world view, an intellectual trend or an alliance of intellectual perspectives drawing on diverse philosophical theories and movements such as post-structuralism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, semiotics, critical theory or neo-pragmatism, many of which challenge the basic assumptions of modernism about knowledge and reality (Burbules 1995; Bloland 2005). Hayden White (2009), a prominent critic of conventional historiography, describes postmodernism as a concept shared by many intellectuals who worked and created within a situation challenging the certainties of twentieth century modernism. He adds that postmodernism was built to seek objectivity, foundations, or truth itself. Following this, postmodernism can be defined by what it is not, by what it has denied and ignored more than by some positive content of some modern kind. Although a precise definition of the term does not exist, various descriptions of the characteristic features of postmodernism are given in works of both the proponents and opponents of the discourse.

Furthermore, Domanska (1999) and other scholars distinguish between postmodernism or postmodernity understood as an epoch which began around 1875 and postmodernism as a specific form of cultural critique which appeared in the Western academic world around 1975 signalling a fundamental change in thinking about and perceiving the world. Domanska (1999) continues saying that postmodernism as an epoch is less a program than a cultural condition, while the other postmodernism is more of an academic and artistic program which signalled a fundamental change in thinking about and perceiving the world. In the following lines I would like to focus more on the postmodernism viewed as a form of cultural critique.

Generally, postmodernism can be defined by the words of Harvey (1990) who views postmodernism as a sceptical reaction to the legacy of the Enlightenment. According to

Giroux (1988a) postmodernism expresses a questioning attitude toward modernism, modernism's claims to universal reason, objectivity, neutrality, or the superiority of science. Therefore, postmodernists believe that there is no universal reason since there is only subjective reason. There is no objective knowledge since it is something of a myth. There is no such thing as a universal, objective, scientific or historical truth. Since there is no knowable universal or ultimate truth, postmodernists doubt whether there is any absolute basis for meaning. They continue saying that meaning is then socially constructed. Moreover, postmodernists claim that the world is too complex to be explained by claiming to have some objective knowledge of absolute truth. This means that there can be no grand narratives using Lyotard's terminology or theories that explain the life of all people for all times (Best and Kellner 1991). Besides, human progress is questioned as well. Science and technology alongside with rationality or reason are not viewed as vehicles of the progress; they are viewed more as some suspicious tools or instruments of establishing power by someone over some other people.

In more practical terms, a postmodernist view of the changes in society emphasizes "extraordinary compression of time and space through the new media" (Butler 2002: 117), in particular through the internet. The internet is "currently non-hierarchized, indeed disorganized, collage" (ibid.). This goes alongside with a shift from a concentration on the production of goods to a concentration on the production of information services. Undoubtedly, today one is working in an information-soaked world, where there is much if not too much of everything. To conclude, this late 20th century movement is also believed to have caused an end of metanarratives, an end of history viewed as the end of totalitarian systems, or an end of reality and many others.

Postmodernism and History

In the following lines I would like to address several selected aspects of postmodernism that could have had an important impact on the writing of history. As mentioned, in relation to history, postmodernism is generally thought to be anti-historical (Domanska 1999). Radical postmodernists see no reason in the purpose of history. Less radical postmodernists see history as a product of human beings. All in all, they both believe that it is impossible to know exactly what happened in the past, at least in an objective sense. There is no ultimate truth, or if there is, it is unknowable. However, it is important to add that postmodern historians do not deny an existence of the past or truth, but they state that multiple truths exist, and they tend to emphasize the subjective nature of the discipline.

That means, it is up to a historian's imagination and ideological background to reconstruct what happened in the past. Ermarth (1992) states that one can only recreate a structure of a past reality and can never truly recreate reality itself. Everyone has their own truth since truth is what you make it. In addition to this, Foucault's well-known postmodern approach to history as one of the originators of the postmodern approach to history states that truth and knowledge are what one uses to construct our own reality but in order to give power over others. Similarly, Lemke (1994) states that words and images are put together in ways that seem pleasing and useful to a particular culture, or to some members of that culture. However, according to Windschuttle (2002) postmodernism criticizes those who assert their power over their readers in the name of reality by assuming a third person voice and an omniscient viewpoint.

Jenkins (1991) characterized post-modern thought as an attempt to de-center language to that of function, and the resulting belief that language defines but does not refer to reality and our experience of reality is a function of our language. Postmodernism closely examines narratives by raising questions as to “how narratives get constructed, what they mean, how they regulate particular forms of moral and social experience, and how they presuppose and embody particular epistemological and political views of the world” (Giroux 1988a: 25).

Another major feature of a postmodernist approach to history is the elimination of the boundaries and hierarchical distinctions between elite culture and academic culture (Cohen 1999) by means of dehierarchization, deconstruction, demystification, and dereferentialization (Berkhofer 1995). Last but not least, since postmodern historiography is closely related to an approach known as structuralism, it explains that history unfolds not because of the actions of key individuals, but because of broader political, economic or social structures. In other words, the role of a human being is minimized but the role of masses is emphasized.

Reactions to the postmodernist approach to history have been varied. First, there is a group of historians who are known as traditional or conventional historians, and they consider postmodernism to be some kind of nonsense. Norman Davies has described postmodernism as a “pastime...for all those who give precedence to the study of historians over the study of the past” (quoted in Southgate 2003: 27). Gertrude Himmelfarb (*ibid.*) stresses that postmodernism is “not so much a revision of modernist history as a repudiation of it”, asserting that in the name of “liberation and creativity”, it gets to “intellectual and moral suicide”. According to Zagorin (quoted in Yilmaz 2007: 182), (a) postmodernism is an amorphous concept and a synthesis of different yet related theories, theses, and claims, (b) the scepticism and relativism inherent in postmodernist philosophy cuts the ground from any moral or political stand its adherents might take, (c) practitioners of the postmodern theory of history have overtly advocated a political agenda as much an academic one as Jenkins did, (d) postmodernists’ sceptical and politicized view of historical inquiry is deeply erroneous, inconsistent with the way historians think about their work, and incapable of providing an understanding of historiography as a form of thought engaged in the attainment of knowledge and understanding of the human past.

Himmelfarb (1987, 1994) was one of the earliest traditional historians to sound the alarm about postmodernism. One of her concerns was that postmodernism would achieve dominance in history as it had in the humanities and social sciences. Windschuttle (quoted in Southgate 2003: 28) believes that postmodernism constitutes a “lethal process”. A second group of historians adopts a moderate approach. In all, they accept that final truth is not attainable and that there are different histories. They see a potential in combining of traditional historiography with elements of postmodern historiography. A third group of historians take a positive approach to the postmodernism. Simon Schama (quoted in Southgate 2003) claims openly to have blurred the traditional distinction between fact and fiction and between the truths derived from documents in archives and those reconstructions created by novelists or poets.

The Legacies of Postmodern Approach to History in the 21st century

Beginning in the late 1980s and continuing to the 2000s, various texts have pronounced the end of postmodernism. Ning (2013) asserts that there is no longer any

dominant theoretical school or literary current that plays a role like the one played by postmodernism and poststructuralism in the latter part of the twentieth century. Various possibilities have been put forward after postmodernism, such as post-postmodernism, digimodernism, metamodernism, performatism or post-millennialism and many others.

Although postmodernism came to its end, for some authors it is only in retreat, it does not mean it has disappeared. It is true that postmodernism is being replaced as the dominant theory, besides, it is taking its place alongside other influential ideas or movements. On the other hand, it is also true that the postmodernism has left a distinctive legacy influencing both its proponents and opponents. The linguistic turn or postcolonial studies are just some of well-known legacies of the postmodernist approach to the history.

Until recently, when doing history, traditional historians have used the tools which have been vastly criticized by postmodernists. But globalization and global history have fundamentally challenged and then changed our ways of learning or knowing, thus, our way of doing history. Conrad (2016: 11) characterizes global history as a “particular way of looking at history” emphasizing integration that serves as a corrective to national and Eurocentric histories. Berg (2013: 3) asserts that the global “emerged from postmodernism and postcolonial directions where crossing boundaries and going beyond borders joined aspirations to write a new imperial history and to undertake comparative studies of the West and the East”. In general, historians accept the idea that global history is essentially about going beyond the national-space of the historiographical framework of the nation-state. Conrad (2016) explains that the growing awareness of the problems of nationalism and Eurocentrism in modern social sciences and humanities, which are rooted in their formation in nineteenth-century Europe, led to the development of world and global history in the twentieth century, with a variety of methodological approaches, including comparative history, transnational history, world history, big history, postcolonial studies, and histories of globalization.

Historically, Drayton and Motadel (2018) explain that global history came out of two post-1950 revolutionary changes. First, it was the collapse of the European empires and consequent call from and also for post-colonial nations for their own history but also for a share in the story of the cosmopolitan. The West’s universities gradually opened themselves to people from the non-West. The second change came with the impact of history from below. Put differently, historical practice after 1960 found the voices of privileged white men no longer central. Much more attention started to be paid to the ones who did not belong to a group of privileged white men.

Therefore, global history has been a history or one approach to history, shaped by postmodernism and widely followed by historians in the third millennium. Global history has both its proponents and opponents. The opponents state that it underestimates national history, but the proponents argue back that it is right the global history we need to overcome the myths of national past which many times goes hand in hand with populism. However, Drayton and Motadel (2018: 3) argue that national history has always been somehow intertwined with some kind of global history. They see a dialogue between the national history and the cosmopolitan and continue saying:

We might usefully rediscover how history at the scales of the local, national, regional and global has been entangled with the very origins of human study of the past. Such an enquiry might help us to better understand...where we are now and what might be the futures of global history.

O'Brien (2006) provides one of two key modes of global history. The comparative approach seeking to understand events in one place through examining their similarities with and differences from how things happened somewhere else. Adelman (2017) provides a connective approach, which elucidates how history is made through the interactions of geographically (or temporally) separate historical communities. These modes and global history itself, are not new, however, their meaning from the very late 20th century to the 21st century is new.

Drayton and Motadel (2018: 6) explain that global history “acquired a new momentum, visibility and sense of collective purpose [...] around 2000.” Global economic historians began to study why Europe took the leap to the industrialization. American historians became more receptive to Atlantic history. Migration became one of central objects of the research in relation to the oceanic histories. In general, global history made visible the invisible that is those who were ignored by the discipline in the West.

In general, the challenge for the 21st century global historian is to find new standards, new methods, or value judgements. And postmodernism has made its way here. Today, global history has been an important and dynamic field of historical studies. Historiographical postmodernism has opened up new areas of investigation, cultural relations and processes. Plurality has replaced singularity; a plurality of approaches, themes, concepts or epistemologies. There is a consensus that global history is concerned with interactions, processes of exchange, and cultural differences in various locations, but also at different points in time (Rotger 2019). Globalization debates have stressed the need to deconstruct nationalism and to portray knowledge production as a shared history where “local happenings are shaped by events occurring miles away and vice versa” (Giddens 1990: 64). Although, there are many scholars or journals across the world which remain dedicated to national history. In other words, to be a global historian means to study specific places, institutions, and people. Rotger (2019) explains that the global turn is not confined to a single field but is an all-encompassing reorientation in the study of culture and society that cuts across disciplines. Thus, in order to be able to think cross-culturally, scholars need to start working cross-disciplinarily.

Concluding Thoughts

Although postmodernism, a program signalling a fundamental change in thinking and perceiving the world, came to its end to the end of 20th century; it has left a distinct legacy in humanities and social sciences. History or global history has been touched, as well. Postmodernism has left a historian with a plurality; e.g., a plurality of truths. Modern technologies, such as social media, provide us with a space where various opinions on various issues are widely spread and moreover, truth of whoever may be of the same truth-value as an empirical fact. Birkinshaw (2017) adds we are living in some post-fact and post-truth world. Some would say we are to live with an acceptance of greater plurality. Such an expansion to certain extent is liberating when it leads to a dialogue but at the same time it can be limiting when it simply does not lead to a dialogue. As mentioned, the 21st century global historian is to find new methods, value judgements and also concepts. The historian may find a new way to tell stories about the past.

Drayton and Motadel (2018) have no doubts that global history has many futures. They explain that it needs to break out of the twentieth-century mode of collecting national

histories. Undoubtedly, global history, though meeting with resistance, has played an important role these days. New kinds of entangled national and global histories may provide one with a sense of a shared global humanity. Hunt (2014) gives a vision of a more globally oriented history encouraging a sense of international citizenship and consequently producing tolerant and cosmopolitan global citizens. Each of us is or maybe should be conscious of the global character of many of our contemporary challenges, going beyond the borders of a nation or state - global warming, migration, pandemics, wars, or terror.

Notes

¹This research was supported by the project VEGA 1/0447/20 The Global and the Local in Postmillennial Anglophone Literatures, Cultures and Media, granted by the Ministry of Education, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic.

References:

- Adelman, Jeremy. 2017. What Is Global History Now? In *Warwick.ac.uk*. Accessed June 1, 2020. Available at: https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/ghcc/blog/jeremy_adelman_what/.
- Burbules, Nicholas C. 1995. Postmodern Doubt and Philosophy of Education. In Alven Neiman. *Philosophy of Education*. 39–48. Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society.
- Berg, Maxine. 2013. Global History: Approaches and New Directions. In Berg, M. (ed.). *Writing the History of the Global. Challenges for the 21st Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Berkhofer, Robert F. 1995. *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Best, Steven and Kellner, Douglas. 1991. *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Best, Steven and Kellner, Douglas. 1997. *The Postmodern Turn*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Birkinshaw, Julian. 2017. The Post-Truth World - Why Have We Had Enough Of Experts? In *Forbes.com*. Accessed May 12, 2020. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lbsbusinessstrategyreview/2017/05/22/the-post-truth-world-why-have-we-had-enough-of-experts/#5938601254e6>.
- Butler, Christopher. 2002. *Postmodernism - A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc.
- Bloland, Harland. G. 2005. Whatever Happened to Postmodernism in Higher Education? No requiem in the new millennium. In *The Journal of Higher Education*, 76. 121–150.
- Cohen, Sol. 1999. *Challenging Orthodoxies. Towards a New Cultural History of Education. Representation of History in the Linguistic Turn*. New York: Peter Lang.

- Conrad, Sebastian. 2016. *What is global history?* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Domanska, Ewa. 1999. Universal History and Postmodernism. In *Storia della Storiografia*, 35. 129-139.
- Drayton, Richard and Motadel, David. 2018. Discussion: the futures of global history. In *Journal of Global History*, 13. 1–21.
- Ermarth, Elizabeth D. 1992. *Sequel to History*. Princetown New Jersey: Princetown University Press.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1990. *The consequences of modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Giroux, Henry A. 1988a. Postmodernism and the Discourse of Educational Criticism, In *Journal of Education*, 170. 5–30.
- Harvey, David. 1990. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An enquiry into the origins of cultural change*. Cambridge: Blackwell.
- Himmelfarb, Gertrude. 1987. *The New History and the Old*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press.
- Himmelfarb, Gertrude. 1994. *On Looking into the Abyss: Untimely Thoughts on Culture and Society*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, NY.
- Hunt, Lynn. 2014. *Writing history in the global era*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Jenkins, Keith. 1991. *Re-thinking History*. London: Routledge.
- Lemke, Jay L. 1994. Semiotics and the Deconstruction of Conceptual Learning. In *Journal of Accelerative Learning and Teaching*, 19. 67–110.
- Ning, Wang. 2013. A reflection on postmodernist fiction in China: Avant-garde narrative experimentation. In *Narrative*, 21(3). 296–308.
- O’Brien, Patrick. 2006. Historiographical traditions and modern imperatives for the restoration of global history. In *Journal of Global History*, 1, 1. 3–39.
- Southgate, Beverly. 2003. *Postmodernism in History: Fear or Freedom?* London: Routledge.
- Windschuttle, Keith. 1997. *The Killing of History*. New York: The Free Press.
- Windschuttle, Keith. 2002. A Critique of the Postmodern Turn in Western Historiography. In Wang, Edward Q., and Iggers, G. (eds.) *Turning Points in Historiography: A Cross Cultural Perspective*, New York: Rochester Press.
- White, Hayden. 2009. “Postmodernism and Historiography,” *Special Public Opening Symposium “After Metahistory: Lecture on Postmodernism by Professor Hayden White,”* Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto City, Japan, October 22, 2009. Accessed October 4, 2014. Available at http://www.ritsumei.ac.jp/acd/gr/gsce/news/200901022_repo_0-e.htm.
- Yilmaz, Kaya. 2007. Postmodernist Approach to the Discipline of History. In *Kocaeli Universitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitusu Dergisi*, 14. 176-188.

Zagorin, Perez. 1998. Historiography and Postmodernism: Reconsiderations. In *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings*. B Fay, P Pomper and RT Vann. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers. 193-205.

Zagorin, Perez. 1999. History, the Referent, and Narrative: Reflections on postmodernism now. In *History and Theory*, 38:1. 1-24.

Mgr. Karin Sabolíková, PhD.
Department of British and American Studies
Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice
Moyzesova 9,
04001 Košice
e-mail: karin.sabolikova@upjs.sk

In SKASE Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies [online]. 2020, vol. 2, no. 1 [cit. 2020-06-24]. Available on web page http://www.skase.sk/Volumes/SJLCS03/pdf_doc/06.pdf. ISSN 2644-5506.