
Postmodernism in International Relations

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Abstract

This paper entitled “postmodernism in international relations” examines the epistemological and ontological development of the theory taking into consideration that the term has already constituted an international relations discourse after the second world war in Europe and that recognition and injection of the theory into international relations was done in 1980. The evolution and emergence of postmodernism as a social theory will be discussed, basic assumptions, contributions and criticisms of the postmodernism will be discussed and analyzed. Related academic books and journals on postmodernism will be used as a reference in gathering literature to analyses the concept in a broader meaning. The paper argued that postmodernism in international relations is a radical departure or break away from modernism way of thinking to postmodernism characterized by the new and complex articulation of world conditions and issues within the context of interpretative and internationalized informed by postmodern preoccupations of new philosophy and ideas based on the relative objective reality of human conditions. The paper concluded that postmodernism is a reaction from modernity to post modernity for their inability and failure to interpret world events based on objective reality.

Keywords: Post Modernism, Theory, Assumptions, International Relations.

Introduction

Post-modernism as a term made up of two different parts. “Post” and “Modern”. The post is a Latin word which means “After” and “Modernism” implies to the modern period, up-to-date or current period. Therefore, postmodernism is a term applied in various disciplines or areas of study in Arts, music, architecture, film, literature, science, technology as well as international relations as a discipline.

The post structuralism and postmodernism are two sides of the same coin because post-structuralism and post modernism is originated both in France and has been dominated by the French philosophers who were Marxist in thinking and inclination after the world war two. The Eastern European countries were still agrarian in nature at that particular time, their economy and polity was also less developed, but suddenly the experienced of the war help in boosting the rapid development and modernization of their socio-political upheavals in the year 1968 which resulted to a “dramatic sense of rupture” (Ercan, 2010) indicating previous French revolutionary behavior. The 1968 students’ demonstration and workers’ industrial action marked the beginning of the “Mass culture” and the “Consumer society”, technology and urbanization which was focused on the new theoretical studies of post modernization. The dominant idea or philosophy of the French society at that time was Marxism, existentialism, and phenomenology, and are considered as “postindustrial society” (Ercan, 2010)

Postmodernism is a period of time between the number of years which is both the beginning and the end of modernity. Postmodernism was developed as a concept and as a continuation of and reaction to modernity which fails to come to the complete understanding of world events objectively. Postmodernism view of international relations focuses on how political action and activities are affected by language, ideas, abstract concepts and norms(lyotard, 1984)

Postmodernism described changes that took place in western society and culture after the Second World War, modernity is a period in history in Europe characterized by expansion of industries using machines to boost productivity and output, rationality and secular thinking as a way of life, while postmodern was a reaction to modernism. The term postmodernism is applied to indicate the emergence of a new period, different social and political situations in international relations and is represents a break up with the past memories, the emergence of a new times or period, characterized by qualitative transformation of society and a departure or movement in cultural sensibility and rise of advanced information technology.

The origin of modernism and postmodernism theory of International relations

Modernism refers to the main cultural lifestyle of the time around the 1890s to the beginning of the Second World War which comprised of ideas and values in painting, music, sculpture, architecture, design, literature of that particular time. Modernism has composed part of the social transformations and movement in political, sociological, scientific, sexual, as well as family life in Europe and other parts of the world under colonial and imperial domination in which scientific and technological development and transformation has an impact positively and negatively in the socio-political and economic life of the people.

Modernization has to do with the scientific and technological transformation which resulted in mass production of aircraft, automobiles, machines and equipment, electricity

and other mechanical inventions in the world. These scientifically and technologically transformations were hoped to improved social human conditions socially, economically and generally make social life easy and better. But the negative impact on society and in the world made people suspicious of the existing social order. Modernism was the cultural response to this developmental change. The idea that science and technology will improve human conditions faded away during the First World War because science and technology were used in the manufacturing and production of dangerous weapons like atomic bombs as well as biological and chemical weapons with nuclear capabilities. Therefore, the future of the world looks bleak and despairs.

In Europe as a result of the experienced of the war and the negative impact of the science and technology, the society question the “modernism” which sparks up the protest, demonstration and civil uprising and struggles of anti-colonial nationalism started in colonies under the domination of the imperial power of the west. The feature of modernization includes industrialization, economic growth, and development, urbanization, secularization, mass education, literacy rate, occupational specialization, social mobility, bureaucratization, and welfare system. In view of the above development, “modernism” was a political interlude particularly in cultural setting that had international dimension, Fascism, another world war, Holocaust of the Jews and the decolonization process in other parts of the world completely changed the perception of the people on “modernism” which was spent on doubt, distrust, and suspicion, lost its cultural value and prestige and therefore new sense of thinking and ideas emerged with vigor and determination to salvage the humanity in general from destruction of science and technology. Based on this development that “Post Modernism” as a philosophy has emerged after the Second World War representing and interpreting more world culture during the cold war period which was pluralistic in nature and is not “new order”, that has displaced modernity in general. Postmodernism is era and movement that developed among French philosophers, thinkers, intellectuals and scholars after the second world war who disagreed with the doctrine or idea of *existentialism*—a doctrine that emphasizes personal or individual existence, freedom and choice which dominated the French society from the 1940s to 1950s. Postmodernism was injected into the international relations scholarship in the year 1980. Richard Ashley was a key and leading figure in postmodernism; other influential proponents of the postmodernism theory were Michael Shapiro, David Campbell, and James Der Derian among others. These groups of scholars try to make intellectuals and scholars understand of their conceptual prisons, (Vasquez, 1999:10). Modernist claimed that science and technology can lead to progress and development in the world which will result to improve life for all human existence, while post modernism questioned modernity believe in science and technology can lead to improving progress and development in the world, postmodernist are suspicious about the dangers of science and technology, for example in developing and manufacturing weapons of mass destruction like Nuclear weapon, chemical, and biological weapons if used can cause devastating consequences on human life, environment and world at large(Bartelson,1996)

Postmodernist thinkers rejected the belief that in all social phenomena, objective knowledge exists. They also disagreed with the classical liberals and neo-realist thinkers like Kant and Waltz who believed in *enlightenment* and *scientific methodologies* to explain how the world works, which to them or their thinking can improve human knowledge, and postmodernist disagreed and rejected their ideas as wrong in perception. Postmodernism considered themselves as run-away scholars and intellectuals from neorealist or a break away from the intellectual prison of neorealist because of their scholarly errors, ineptitude and academic arrogance. Postmodern international relations theories debunked the idea that objective truth exists in the world as claimed by other theorists like neorealist and classical liberals. They also debunked the idea that there can be ever-expanding knowledge of the human world, to postmodernist, such thinking is regarded as subjective beliefs, including religious belief are considered as intellectual illusions, knowledge cannot expand and improve human life, there is no universal human progress including the international political system. Because according to (Smith, 1997:181), stated that, “power requires knowledge and all knowledge relies on and reinforces existing power relations”, this means that there is no objective truth that is existing outside of power. Postmodern international relations theorists examine the validity of the truths of international relations to see how the concepts and knowledge claim that dominate the international relations discipline as contestable on power relations.

Lyotard, (1984:345) stated that postmodernism regarded this explanation as metanarratives, neorealism, and neoliberalism who claimed to have believed in the truth about the international political system are considered to be lacking substance and credibility because the anarchical structure of international system cannot be supported due lack of independent and unbiased evidence for judging them.

A postmodernism view of international relations, some postmodernism scholars argued that different approaches to international relations theory have not made any adequate explanation to the theorization of international relations, therefore, their explanation always leads to disorder and complete of inaccuracy. However, postmodernism theory of international relations focused on and produced the idea of power-knowledge relationship which rejected the notion of “absolute truth” which is supported by positivism.

Postmodern theory of international relations provides us with various “methodologies like genealogy, text, narrative, discourse, deconstruction, and double-reading to explain international and world politics”, according to Der Derian et al, (1989:45) Postmodernism has used various ways like deconstruction of text to overcome other theories and concepts that people believe in.

In the past years, international relations theory has been dominated by four main theories: Realism, liberalism, Marxism and constructivism, postmodernism theory has emerged to help in understanding of world politics properly in 1980, but before then, most of the social sciences theorist are positivists in ideology,” the assumption of the positivist was

seriously challenged and criticized in the positivism and post-positivism debate or the so-called third debate” according to (Campbell, 1996:23). 8“The criticism of positivism emerged from feminism, critical theory, post-colonialism, post-structuralism and post modernism”. Their assumptions are that they all see the world as something external to the international relations theory according to, (Ashley, 1989:12)

Postmodernism is the term or concept used by another social science discipline to describe a way of thinking that has become general in the western society cultures, postmodernism is also an approach to reality that has a very important impact on architecture, art, education, law, literature, psychology, science, theatre, history, and theology.

The classical account of international relations made of two rival theories; realism and liberalism. The conceptual tools or terms for realism are the states, anarchy, sovereignty, balance of power, while that of liberalism is a democracy, peace, and states. Postmodernism as a theory is always denaturalizing some theories, it is an approach rather than explanation which debunked and rejected some assumptions of some theories and concepts, therefore, postmodernism has three variables or assumptions, it criticizes the idea of established knowledge; it is an idea for a literary turn in scholarship and it is also a reaction or movement from modernity to postmodernism.

Again, the postmodernism as a theory rejected the nature of modernity and agreed to the notion or idea of existing structures were just “established by human beings like the so-called “Truth” which is in actual sense is a matter of “choice” made by a predecessor” according to (Ashley, 1990:32), according to postmodernism, the theory rejected the notion of objective truth because the truth and knowledge of reality depends on our understanding and representation of reality.

Der Derrian stated that international relations as a discipline are particularly conducive to the postmodern approach. It seems almost as though the global stage is a lens for those phenomena that best reveal the shortcomings of those theories, the socio-political based in overarching metanarratives. In Der Derian opinion, the complexity, ambivalence, and indeterminacy of human relations magnified, mediated and estranged in the universal arena, make it all the more evident why a single theory cannot explain the workings of world politics (Der Derria,1988)

According to postmodernism theory of international relations, states are the unit of analysis and are the only primary actor which possesses the legitimate right to command and “organized violence” in international affairs, they are the “dominant form of subjectivity” in world politics, and the influential intersubjectivity created institutions (Burchill, et al 2009)

Post-modernist in international relations theory seeks to revive the notion of power and redefined it. A postmodernist in international relations theory would analyze how, as a

consequence of what power relations, agents perceived understand and act each and also what the result of their interactions might be for existing power relations.

Walker claims that postmodern as an international relations theory can be decoupled from its corresponding literary, philosophical and visual manifestations. He believes that, unlike other theories, postmodernist international relations theory is mainly concerned with the politics of the territory, boundaries and political demarcations of land, trying to explain and offer advice about the security and transgression of borders established forms of order and community inside and the realm of either danger, insecurity, war or more world conceived humanity, peace, and world politics. Therefore, the events that influenced the emergence or origin of postmodernism were associated with the social movement in France in 1968 and resistance struggles against established and imperial power blocs in different parts of the world and influence of science and technology in international relations.

Main assumptions of postmodernism theory of International relations

Like critical theorists, post modernism main aim is to make theorists and scholars get acquainted of their *conceptual prisons*, post modernism also attacks or criticizes modernity, it argues that the most significant prison is that of modernity itself and the whole idea that modernization leads to progress and a better life for all. Postmodernism attacked classical liberalism belief in *Enlightenment* thinkers like Immanuel Kant and Waltz who was a Neorealist who believe in *scientific* methodologies to explain how the world works.

Postmodernism theory of international relations argues that there is no *objective reality* in the world, everything involving human beings is *subjective* in nature. This means that the idea of knowledge is dependent on one's belief, because, in relativism, it is believed that the idea of *absolute truth* does not even exist.

No grand narrative, in the middle ages, one's belief and expectations of how the world works are influenced by language, ideas, religion or belief system, abstract concepts, values, and norms. Believe in God or religion gave a society *grand narratives*. All aspect of life is interpreted from a religious point of view. But in postmodernism, society is a more diverse, belief in *one truth* or *universal criteria* which has been replaced by a number of *small stories* and *diversity of criteria*. Therefore, to postmodernism thinkers, all religious belief is the *grand narrative* and *subjective* in nature.

Postmodernism regarded religion and Marxism as Metanarratives which attempts to provide an explanation on many things that should be view with suspicion because human experience is different and diverse and it is not possible to provide theories that will account for everything in a way that is important to all people. The way and manner people in Africa or Europe understand and interpret the world is different from each other

due to different socio-cultural backgrounds and individual perceptions, according to (Lyotart,1984:23)

Postmodernism seeks to tear down or deconstruct existing theories, according to them all social science theories are not neutral, and it is historically, culturally and politically biased and impartial. To postmodernism, all empirical theory is just a myth, therefore, all theories should be deconstructed, it is contaminated by personal views, opinions, and prejudices, and the main target of postmodernism deconstruction in international relations is neorealism.

Postmodernism attacks neorealism for a number of reasons:

- They argue that states are not the only actors in the international political system; other actors include individuals, MNCs, NGOs.
- They also argue that states are not rational actors and there is nothing like national interest.
- They argue that realist is wrong to focus only on major powers and limited on the notion of power only and thus miss the role of norms, ideas, belief system and other issues that fall within the theory of realism.

Postmodernism also rejected the idea that there could be firm foundations, eg, reason or experience upon which to build our knowledge. Philosophers question if it is possible to have actual knowledge about the world since before the development or emergence of postmodernism philosophers or thinkers believed that it is not possible to be a neutral observer and it is impossible to know whether the world appears to us actually corresponds to reality. According to social constructivism, reality is created by social reality, there is no objective knowledge or absolute representation of reality, therefore, scientific results are constructs, there is no absolute truth and belief in social construction, may end up in “nihilism” and a disrespectful for that which can help human civilization make progress.

Waltz, (1993:75), stated that “in an anarchical international system, only a few elements of information about sovereign states can tell us significant things and development we need to understand about international relations, and the postmodernism theory of international relations claims to validly explain international politics through all the centuries we can contemplate”.

Ashley, (1986:29), observed that neorealism has many “constraints in confronting change in international relations”, this indicates the inadequacy of the theory, the future remains uncertain between internal sovereign statehood and international anarchy, the establishment of world government and termination of sovereign statehood.

Contributions of postmodernism theory of International relations

One of the contributions of the postmodernism theory of international relations is that it establishes a power-knowledge relationship and the non-existence of absolute truth. Postmodernism makes reference to the power-knowledge relationship and criticized the notion of dominant in rationalist and positivism that knowledge is not important to the working power; they also opposed the existence of absolute truth. Knowledge is not related to power from a positivist point of view and truth exists. Michel Foucault, (1994:34), disagreed with this viewpoint and argued that power produces knowledge, he further stated that “power requires knowledge and knowledge relies on and reinforces existing power relations”. Thus, no absolute truth exists outside power.

Different methodology on analyzing “Text”, Postmodernism agreed that the world needs to be understood as a “Text” and reference to it are interpretative. They believed that the world is plural, the best explanation for the “Text” does not exist and therefore explanation must be plural. Postmodernism applied different techniques like “deconstruction” and “double reading” in explaining the “Text”

Deconstruction is an approach used by postmodernism to explain how theories and conversation are formulated based on artificial means of objective and natural oppositions, Postmodernism is a clarification of decorum, there is no honesty, only truths, there are no principles, only preferences, there is no logic only reasons, there is no advantaged civilization, only a favorite, there is no basis only justification, there is no privileged advancement, only a multiple of cultures, beliefs, periods and styles. There is no grand narrative of human progress, only countless stories of where people and their cultures are known, there is no simple reality or objectivity of universal, detached knowledge, only a ceaseless representation of everything.

Double reading- is an approached or method used by postmodernism to read “Text” more than once and more deeply. Ashley, (1996:45), stated that postmodernism used this method or approach to analyze world politics like “The anarchy problems” of dominant in international relations theory since the 1980s.

Criticisms of postmodernism theory of international relations

Naom Chomsky, (1996:23), criticizes postmodernism has “adds nothing to analytical or empirical knowledge” because postmodernism intellectuals don’t respond like other people in another discipline, they put too much emphasis on the theoretical notions and they are not focused or concerned with the empirical evidence.

Daniel (1992:12), also condemns postmodernism that claims that there is no “absolute truth”, only interpretations or narratives have been a disrespect for evidence and settling for “conversations” in which nobody is wrong and nothing can be validated or proof.

Fred Halliday, (1994:45), has castigated postmodernism of being too much engage in “theory” which was incoherent, empty and disconnected from the real world of international relations, there is a disconnect between theory and practice, they engage in theory for their own sake.

Dogmatically, refusal of complete truth is difficult for a creed that tends to claim to preserve and pass on absolute reality. The notion that all experience is subjective challenges the idea that exposition can be trusted. This way of thinking encounters “secular” rationality just as much as it contests religion, thus, it could save faith from the test of reason.

Postmodernism scholars like Michael Foucault argued that the idea or notion of truth is an illusion. According to him “knowledge” and “Truth” are created by those in power. What we take to be true is the dominant world view that we have been provided with. It is received wisdom, not the truth. Foucault²¹ rejected that society is progressing. The world is not getting better or getting closer to the truth. It is moving through different world views. Each different has a different idea of truth and a different version of right and wrong. People internalize and generally accept the version of reality that they are told by those in power. This then shapes how they think. Postmodernism as a theory of international relations fails to provide an adequate conception of theory, reality or political practice. Postmodernism cannot provide a satisfactory understanding of the relationship between theory and practice since it neither adequately represents the “real world” nor contains theory and practice. The views of postmodernism are so unrelated to “the real world” situation.

Conclusion

The postmodern theory of international relations is the rejection of scientific objectivity as a misleading and political maneuver of narratives. Emancipation which was the main focused of the Enlightenment which critics claim postmodernist debunked is the bedrock of postmodernist international relations based on the fact that there is moderate postmodernism that is situated on the belief that ideas and theories of international relations about the world are more often than not contains the elements of both subjectivity and objectivity. The notion of inter subjectivity of knowledge that is a bound standard of documentation and clarity of explanation. Moderate postmodernism approaches the position of the constructivist which was based on the concept of inter subjectivity.

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