

**POST-MODERNISTS' CONCEPTION OF HISTORY AND A CRITIQUE OF THE
END OF HISTORY BY FRANCIS FUKUYAMA**

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Abstract

Post-modernists attempt to fragmentise and decentralise the study of history by providing a metanarrative framework for historicising events. There is the rejection of grand narratives as overarching stories or theories cannot fully explain historical events or societies. They are antithetical to truth and objective realism, denying historical and scientific truth as well as the general philosophical viewpoints taken for granted during the 18th-century Enlightenment. The viewpoint was that there is an objective, natural reality whose existence and properties are logically independent of human beings – of their minds, societies, social practices, or their investigative techniques. They dismissed these ideas because they were seen as naïve realism. A concentration on current life issues, rather than the past, as well as introspective studies of the present, has given a new dimension to the study of not only history but also science. However, no ideology or theory is accurate. All the techniques used in the study of the past and the present are equally important in understanding how societies have evolved to their current state. This paper interrogates the Postmodernists' position on the study of history. This is achieved by examining the nature of history and its relevance to society, as well as the methods historians employ in studying the past and the present. In doing this, the historical process is used, utilising written documents and an interdisciplinary approach through extensive consultations. The scope encompasses the period from postmodernism's emergence as a school of thought to its contributions to the development of science and historiography. It has been observed that history is a continuous process of dialogue with the past, present, and future. Therefore, despite the inherent weaknesses of historical sources, history will remain a relevant discipline and will never come to an end, as Francis Fukuyama argued. This is because historians also study the present in relation to the past and engage in introspection, just as other disciplines do, which continue to shape modern thinking and development. Research of this magnitude will undoubtedly lead to further studies, as it addresses contemporary issues of historical value.

Key Words: Postmodernism, Critique, History, Historiography

Introduction

History can be viewed in the light of the past, present, and future because of linkages in human activities and experiences. That is why, no matter the position of any theorist, it will continue to be relevant in the study of man and society. The Post-modernists have contributed immensely to the development of modern historiography. Their criticism of the history of grand narratives, subjective truth, and questioning established assumptions adds another dimension to the study of history. Although it is difficult to establish objective truth due to the dynamic nature of history and historians' personal biases, subjectivity can be minimised if those biases are put in check. The value of history lies in its cross-fertilisation of ideas across all fields of human endeavour and in linking eras and ages. History also covers a wide range of topics and courses, such as colonialism, neocolonialism, globalisation, feminism, and so on, which are examined in both the context of the past and the present. The study of history also enhances discoveries and development. This paper puts side by side the significance of history and its contribution to human existence and society, the contribution of postmodernists to the development of modern historiography, and how their contributions could help strengthen its development. Postmodernists tend to defend subjectivism against historical facts, truth, and objectivity. Whatever their position, the Post-modernists have become part of historical processes through their contributions to knowledge. This paper is critical because it studies and interrogates Postmodernists' positions on history and how they brought the significance of history to the forefront for further scrutiny.

What is History?

The subject matter of history will continue to be debated due to its association with both the arts and science, as well as its attempts to link the past with the present and the present with the future. For a more explanation, this work sees history as the branch of knowledge dealing with not only the past but also of the present and the future events, as a continuous and systematic narrative of events relating to a particular people, country, period, persons and so on, usually written in chronological account (chronicle) in connection with the human race; it also deals with ideas that can shape the course of the future. For instance, significant events occurring now may be documented for future reference, along with lessons learned. We can see the media's role in this regard. More so, the difference between the past, the now, and the future is only demarcated by a thin line. For instance, many people who died today will be added a title called "late", which is past tense, but were, in the real sense of the matter, present today. This is why, without much ado, the most significant definition of history in use today is that of E.H. Carr, even though, with much contention, he defines history as an unending dialogue between the historian and his facts of the present and the past.¹ And that the historical facts and historians are intertwined and would be meaningless in the absence of each other. This is why, in some opinions, history is what the historian makes out of it.² If this is so, the historians who are still living can travel with history into the future for as long as they live. Also, if the past transcends into the present, it can even transcend into the future, even by mere coincidence. For instance, history today studies both causes and effects, and how global issues and challenges can be solved using historical knowledge, experiences, and lessons from the past. History has moved beyond the past to the study of the

¹E.H. Carr. *What is History?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961).

² E.H. Carr. *What is History?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), p.162, Harden White, *The Nature of Historical Narrative And the Role of Storytelling in Shaping our Understanding of the Past*. His discussion of metahistory and tropes helps clarify this. *Metahistory: the Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (1973), p. 244

present, seeking answers to questions about the past through introspective studies, just as postmodernists focus on present-day issues. Put, history could be regarded as a sack the historian fills with his historical knowledge to make sense of life, which is a significant contribution to humanity's development. Filling the sack means filling the gulf in human endeavours as to progress and limitations. Herodotus (c. 484-425 BCE), who wrote the chronicle of the Greco-Persian Wars in his work "The Histories, emphasises the importance of eyewitness accounts and primary sources to the writing of history in filling the empty sack while linking history to the past. To him, history is the study of the past, particularly the actions and events that have shaped human societies.³

In a more broader and clearer terms, history could be viewed from the interpretation and analysis of past events of historical value, human experiences; actions and decisions of individuals and groups by shedding light on the contexts of their lives, as well as the contextualization of social, cultural, economic and political activities of humankind for discovery or rediscovery which are significant drivers of contemporary development due to nuanced lessons learned from the past of failures and successes thereby, providing us with a deeper understanding of the present and future. History to this end can be contextualised as follows: history is development, and development is history. This is in addition to other contributors like Leopold Von Ranke, R.G. Collingwood and Arthur Marwick. Leopold, in his reflections on the history of the world, describes history as a systematic study of past events, grounded in a critical examination of sources and a rigorous methodology.⁴ Also, R.G. Collingwood sees history as the reenactment of past experiences, a process of imaginative reconstruction based on evidence and interpretation.⁵ Arthur

³ *The Histories, The History of Herodotus' Magnum Opus*, translated into English by G.C. Macaulay. (London: MacMillan and Co., 1890).

⁴ L. Von Ranke. *The Theory and Practice of History* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), pp. 5-8

⁵ R.G. Collingwood. *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 10-12

Marwick also see history as a study of change over time, encompassing the complexities of human societies, cultures and experiences.⁶ These provide awareness to the society we live in, serving as the most excellent service to nation-building.

Postmodernist Theory and View on History

It is worth noting that postmodernism challenges traditional notions of history by questioning grand narratives and objective truths, arguing that knowledge and truth are fragmented and contingent on individual and local contexts. In their view, truth is subjective because of personal biases and cultural norms. They also challenged monolithic structures of power and authority, which provides a more fragmented view of history and society. They therefore question the established assumptions because, to them, knowledge is shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts, making it difficult or impossible to achieve objective truth.⁷

In Western philosophy, postmodernism is a movement characterised by broad scepticism, subjectivism or relativism; a general suspicion of reason; and an acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power. It was a reaction against the assumptions and values of the modern period in Western philosophy, from the 17th to the 19th centuries. They stand to deny the general philosophical viewpoints that were taken for granted during the 18th-century Enlightenment. The views held that there is an objective natural reality whose existence and properties are logically independent of human beings, their minds, societies, social practices, or their investigative techniques. They dismissed these ideas because they were

⁶ A. Marwick. *The New Nature of History: Knowledge, Evidence, Language* (Palgrave Publishers: 2001), p. 152

⁷ W. Thompson. *A Concise Introduction to Postmodernist Theory and Its Impact on Historical Study* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 1st Edition, p. 15)

seen as naïve realism.⁸ According to them, what exists is a conceptual construct, an artefact of scientific practice and language.⁹ Also, the descriptive and explanatory statements of scientists and historians, taken in principle as objectively true or false, have no place with postmodernists, as this follows from the rejection of an objective natural reality and the positing that there is no such thing as Truth. Postmodernists also argue against the belief that, through the use of reason and logic and the specialised tools provided by science and technology, human beings are likely to change themselves and their societies for the better.¹⁰ The Postmodernists believe that reason, science, and technology will make future societies more humane, just, and more enlightened and prosperous. Postmodernists deny faith in science and technology as instruments of human progress because science and technology have created more problems in the development of ammunition and nuclear weapons that could lead to the extinction of humankind, citing the examples of the FIRST and Second World Wars. Also, reason and logic are inherently destructive and oppressive because evil people have used them to oppress others.¹¹

To postmodernists, it is a misnomer to equate reason and logic. For postmodernists, reason and logic are merely conceptual constructs, valid only within the established intellectual traditions in which they are used. In contrast to the belief in human nature, which holds that faculties, aptitudes, or dispositions are, in some sense, present in human beings at birth rather than learned through social forces, postmodernists believe that all aspects of human psychology are completely socially determined.¹² Modernists see language as representing a reality outside itself, but the postmodernists see language as not a mirror of nature and deconstruct the view that language is

⁸S. Trachtenberg, *Critical Essay on American Postmodernism*. (G.K. Hall, 1995), p. 20

⁹B. Duigman. History. Ed. *Britannica.com*. Accessed 30/11/2022. 1 pm

¹⁰F. Jameson. *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. (Duke Up, 1991), p. 461

¹¹M. Peter. *Critical Pedagogy and Predatory Culture*. (Peter Lang Inc. International Academic Publishers, 2007), New Edition.2-12, p. 58

¹²R. Dawkins. *Postmodernism Disrobed*. *Nature*, (USA: Picado. 9 July 1998), Vol. 394. 141-3, Pp137-145. Cited in *nature.com*. 02-12-22. 3 pm

static. They also reject the assumption that human beings can acquire knowledge of natural reality, which can be justified by evidence or intuitive principles. They rejected this philosophical foundationalism. Also, they don't believe there could be a general theory of human history, such as dialectical materialism, because such theories totalize systems of thought. This kind of assumption is pernicious not only because it is false but also because it imposes conformity on other perspectives or discourses by silencing them.¹³

Postmodern historiography emphasises differentiation, discontinuity, and minority viewpoints, in contrast to modern historical inquiry, which seeks to establish general patterns, overall similarities, and dominant trends.¹⁴ They designate an array of approaches to historical inquiry that eschew modern historiographical assumptions, including teleology, coherence, totalizing or grand narratives, determinism, progress, truth, realism, objectivity, universality, and essentialism. Post-modernists are seen as counter-history or anti-history, metahistory, critical and practical history, new historicism, and new cultural history. This is exemplified in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, Hayden White, and Stephen Greenblatt.¹⁵

The Contribution of Postmodernism to the Development of Historiography

Their contribution is in the area of curriculum history and its role in theories of knowledge concerning the purposes of inquiry, the foci of study, and epistemological commitments. The postmodern historiography is generally not a truth-seeking endeavour. They have drawn our attention to historiographical problems during the Enlightenment and to its incoherent assumptions

¹³B. Duigman. History. Ed. *Britannica.com*. Accessed 30/11/2022. 1 pm

¹⁴C. Kridel. Cultural Studies (general), Curriculum and Content (general), Curriculum Studies. In Craig Kridel. *Encyclopedia of Curriculum Studies*, p. 1065

¹⁵Y. Kaya. Postmodernism and Its Challenge to the Discipline of History: Implications for History Education. In *Educational Philosophy and Theory*. (2010), 42. (7), p.779

about history and science. The most crucial contribution of postmodernists to the study of history is their influence on our thoughts, ideas, and concepts of history and historiography. They tend to give new forms to historians' work. They try to shift the conceptualisation of history from objective and empirical science to a discipline as flexible as language and culture are, inextricably bound to them and, for this reason, thoroughly pluralistic and subjective.¹⁶ Postmodernists are introspective. They use an introspective approach, which enables them to discover more about the present than about the past.¹⁷ Also, the rise of Post-structuralism, which has been integrated into postmodern thought, has led history to be increasingly influenced by the dynamics of power rather than by a supposed intention toward pure objectivity. Postmodernism also introduced the concept of relativity into Western history, borrowing it from the Theory.¹⁸ Postmodern thought in history is the shift in the conceptualisation of time, which is paramount to the historical definition and structuralisation of facts.¹⁹ They are also engaged in psychoanalysis.

In all, their contribution lies in linguistics (language) and culture, which influence historians' ways of conceiving ideas, lecturing, and writing, and so on. And so, there can never be an objective reality. This is why Niels Bohr argues that reality cannot exist outside human consciousness.²⁰ Another influence of postmodernism on the development of historiography is the improvement of our knowledge of the past and its indissoluble liaison with the present, and the discovery of the metahistorical essence in the historical nature, according to John Lamola.²¹

¹⁶J. M. Lamola. African Postmodernism: Its Moment, Nature and Content. *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies – Multi, Inter – and Transdisciplinarity*. (Published online: 2010, 2017), pp. 1-2

¹⁷J. M. Lamola. African Postmodernism: Its Moment, Nature and Content. *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies – Multi, Inter – and Transdisciplinarity*. (Published online: 2010, 2017), pp. 1-2

¹⁸J. Ermarth. Sequel to History. In K. Jenkins. Ed. *The Postmodern History Reader*. (USA: 2006), p. 51

¹⁹D.R. Dickens and A. Fontana. Time and Postmodernism, *Symbolic Interaction* (2002), Vol. 25, 3. P.393. <http://www.jstor.org> > stable. Accessed 02/12/22. 1 pm

²⁰N. Bohr. Quoted in A. Boyd. (2002), No. 2627. The Bohr-Einstein Debates, in < <http://www.uh.edu.engines/epi2627.htm> > accessed 27/11/22. 3 pm. See <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki>. accessed 27/11/22. 3 pm

²¹John, M. Lamola. African Postmodernism: Its Moment, Nature and Content. *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies – Multi, Inter – and Transdisciplinarity*. 2017. Published online. p. 11

Critiquing the Post-Modernists

They brought to light some of the errors of modernist theorists, but were unfair in treating the pursuit of objective truth as a futile endeavour. This is because we are all products of historical processes and, due to innate human errors and differences in ideological inclinations, cannot conclude a particular discipline and its methodology. History has no room for generalisation or conclusions about any subject, as there is always room for improvement and continuation. The *prima facie* of history, at a glance, is: change and continuity.

Their position is a rejection of grand narratives and ideologies associated with modernism, especially Enlightenment rationality. They criticised modernism for its reliance on Universalist ideas of objective reality, morality, truth, human nature, reason, science, language, and social progress.²² On the other hand, critics of postmodernism often defend such concepts. It was alleged that postmodernism promotes obscurantism and is hostile to objective truth by encouraging relativism (in culture, morality and knowledge) to an extent that is epistemically and ethically crippling.²³ Its obscure and entropic sides are in *massification* and extreme homogenization. They are good at synchronising the scientific and humanistic disciplines; the creation of a theoretical void, with no dogmatic knowledge to follow, makes postmodernism a remarkably revolutionary current of thought.²⁴

Postmodernists and Their Relationship with Francis Fukuyama on the End of History

Many look at history with scorn and disdain. Postmodernists, like many scholars, tend to view history from a perspective of weakness rather than its strength. Our distance from the past,

²²A. Callinicos. *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique*. (St. Martins: Polity, 1994). Cited in Wikipedia. En.m.wikipedia.org. Criticism of Postmodernism. 30/11/22. 3 pm

²³D. Hebdige. Postmodernism and the other side. In John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*. (London: Pearson Education, 2006)

²⁴J. Baudrillard. The Illusion of the End in K. Jenkins *The Postmodern History Reader*. p. 42

the lack of adequate sources of information, and the personal biases of the people who generate history give postmodernists a nodding impulse toward their defence of subjective truth. They thought history was losing its relevance due to incredulity towards metanarratives and a shift away from the age of positivism and the Enlightenment.²⁵ Also, history in contemporary times has been seen as non-scientific, as it is thoroughly human and ever-changing.²⁶ And in its struggle to express the fact, and the real, the historical discourse mixes it with its imaginary structure, thereby creating a fictional authoritative statement on reality or as reality.²⁷

Also, as the concatenation of historical cause and effect and its relative representation is discovered to be determined by a human and subjective will for power, it is an unconditionally accepted truth that has to be called into question.²⁸ Also, there is a belief that objectivity and smooth linearity have now made room for subjectivity and sheer disconnection. So, postmodernists put themselves in a doubtful position, and formulate that uncertainty cannot be eliminated from history. Hence the question: can history be called so, in the light of these theories? Also, history is assumed to be talking about the past, which is now being called into doubt. So, should the past be linguistically referred to as history? Moreover, more has been discovered about the mechanics and dynamics of creating and giving shape to history than about the past itself as traditionally conceived.

More so, along with language goes culture. The historian, as well as every scholar or theorist, comes from a determined cultural background that shapes and inevitably influences their

²⁵M. John Lamola. African Postmodernism: Its Moment, Nature and Content. *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies – Multi, Inter – and Transdisciplinarity*. (Published online, 2017) pp. 1-2

²⁶L. Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*. (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 89

²⁷R. Barthes. The discourse of History. In K. Jenkins Ed. *The Postmodern History Reader*. (USA: Routledge, 2006), p. 122. See <http://www.routledge.com>. accessed on 30/11/22. 2 pm

²⁸R. Barthes. opp. cit. p. 121

writings or lectures, transmitting a somewhat unconsciously distorted view of what one calls objective reality. So, for postmodernists, objectivity no longer has privileged status.²⁹ This, in reality, relates to the basic assumption of Francis Fukuyama that history has come to an end, even though the postmodernists did not categorically say so.³⁰ Fukuyama argues that liberal democracy has become the final form of human government, with Western liberal democracy emerging as the ultimate victor in the ideological struggles of the 20th century.³¹

While the postmodernists' position is clear, Leopold von Ranke's viewpoint is equally clear: historians can strive to achieve objective truth by detaching themselves from their sources.³² History has proven Fukuyama wrong, especially with the continuous influence of communism and other ideologies. It is good to establish that, no matter the inherent problems and challenges of history, it cannot be written off, as no society is static, and no profession or discipline is without internal challenges that need improvement. So long as the human race and the societies they live in exist, history will continue to serve the need for development, as it provides rich information for lessons to be learned.

The Continuity of History and Its Contribution to Development

Postmodernism tends to accord history a status of meaninglessness. It has denied history's identification with truth, with every right to do so, because its fundamental function is to call into question every established idea and institution.³³ History is delegitimised through subtle

²⁹M. John Lamola. African Postmodernism: Its Moment, Nature and Content. *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies – Multi, Inter – and Transdisciplinarity*. (Published online, 2017), p. 8

³⁰F. Fukuyama. *The End of History and the Last Man*, (England: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 3, 55 and 145

³¹F. Fukuyama. *The End of History and the Last Man*, (England: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 8, 12 and 145

³²L. Von Ranke. *The Theory and Practice of History*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), p. 8

³³L. Hutcheon. *Poetics of Postmodernism*. New York. (2004), p. 87

subjectivisation and the molecularisation of the studied facts.³⁴ Despite this, can we arguably ascribe meaninglessness to history because it is challenging to achieve objective truth? Or, based on Fukuyama, has history come to an end due to the triumph of Western democracy? Never! And I say Never!!

History can never come to an end or be ascribed a meaningless status because, so long as there is human existence, inquiries must continue. Historians are working to address issues of bias. Moreover, Fukuyama's position on democracy is incorrect, as democracy is not the only historical process. History in itself is an inquiry into the activities of humankind and society. The only thing is, as errors about the past are continually discovered, the mistakes of the past can be corrected through empirical inquiry into such events, as postmodernists do. Also, it is good to know that introspection applies to the past as well as the present, because introspective knowledge may lead to a better understanding of the past.³⁵ However, as buttressed by Ginzburg, historians must be aware of the risk of misunderstanding their object of study, as one of the most challenging tasks it entails is that of succeeding entering its cultural universe as they are always in danger of taking for granted the words of a document if they do not consider its actual degree of deformation by the hegemonic culture that produced it.³⁶ This is why we need to be careful of our sources.

Also, even postmodernists believe in culture as history, and as the study of culture has grown, history has moved beyond the mere past.³⁷ Because culture is an ever-changing feature that irreparably separates human beings across time and space.³⁸ It is also good to emphasise that the

³⁴M. John Lamola. African Postmodernism: Its Moment, Nature and Content. *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies – Multi, Inter – and Transdisciplinarity*. (Published online, 2017), p. 3

³⁵J.F. Lyotard, The Postmodern Conditions. In K. Jenkins, Ed. *The Postmodern History Reader*. (USA: 2006), p. 36

³⁶C. Ginzburg; C. Anne Tedeschi and J. Tedeschi, *IL Formaggio e I Vermi*, (Italy: G. Einaudi, 1976), p. xiii.

³⁷M. John Lamola. African Postmodernism: Its Moment, Nature and Content. *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies – Multi, Inter – and Transdisciplinarity*. (Published online, 2017), p. 9

³⁸C. Geertz. *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 89

past is understood by the same means we seek to understand the present and the future. As noted by John Lamola, the conception of the past inevitably finds itself currently mixed with the interpretation of the present. Hence, the fusion of history and sociology, in which the work of historians is found, is merged with that of sociologists.³⁹

Conclusion

From the discussion so far, the paper sheds light on the nature of history as an inquiry and an attempt to link the past with the present and the future by way of studying the past in relation with the present concerning the problems and challenges of human race and how they could be solved, and also talks about the contribution of postmodernism to the study of history and historiography. The postmodernists have given new form to historians' work by shaping their thoughts, ways of thinking, and concepts of history and historiography, viewing history not as an empirical science but rather as a pluralistic, subjective enterprise through their study of language and culture. They provide a nuanced approach to our study of history. However, their conclusion about the attainment of objective truth remains questionable, as there is no reason to close it off, since people with an objective mind still exist. Their study and dealing with the present should not also discard engagement with the past, no matter the challenges posed by historical narratives.

History has also moved beyond the past to the present, as it addresses a variety of topics in economics, development, intergroup relations, war, and governance and politics. Moreover, postmodernism is itself a part of historical processes and a branch of history, just as political science and diplomatic studies appear today. History seeks answers to questions, challenges, and

³⁹M. John Lamola. African Postmodernism: Its Moment, Nature and Content. *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies – Multi, Inter – and Transdisciplinarity*. (Published online, 2017), p. 11

problems confronting the human race, even in the present. The postmodernists' subjective, relative and skeptic positions against the objective position of history has only provided a new dimension and approach to the study of history in delivering general suspicion of reason and sensitivity to the role of ideology by seeing objective history as naïve realism because uncertainty cannot be eliminated from history but not to disregard the past and the place of objectivity in history.

Also, the most commonly ingrained contribution of history to development is in the area of continuity in line with Arthur Marwick's position. The study of continuity and change provides humanity with self-awareness for improving society, which is the most excellent service to nation-building. This self-awareness includes lessons from the devastating effects of war, terrorism, poverty, poor governance, and other forms of social injustice, to make society a better place. For instance, history teaches us to avoid creating a toxic environment for ourselves. Any study that does not reflect continuity, and especially change, should be discarded. History offers both values to humankind.