

Once were Positivists: A Reply to Aya

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There are two basic issues in this essay. The first is the sloppy use of the term 'postmodernism' to designate a more or less organised collection of unsavoury academics, who (it is argued) subscribe to various forms of nihilism and epistemological hypochondria for some, as-yet-to-be-determined but clearly nefarious, ends. The exact composition of this group is left vague (although the author clearly has his own list). It presumably includes a fair sampling of theorists of the French persuasion, most feminists, authors who are interested in the entwining of power and knowledge in human life, and nearly all 'relativists' who reject monistic certainty. For Aya, the term clearly saves time, basically by assuring himself that there has been little really worth reading in the social sciences (at least in anthropology) for the past quarter century or so.

The more serious issue in this paper, though, is a slippery slope argument, equating any contextual partialness in understanding knowledge in the human sciences with the abandonment of any claim to science as such, logically leading to only individual maps of the world that are only ever able to be provisionally coordinated with one another. Moreover, to the extent that the triumph of the nefarious forces of 'postmodernism' is a recent one for the author, one senses a certain nostalgia for an earlier moment in the discipline. Everything was going along swimmingly in some golden age (presumably when everyone was hunting for segmentary lineage systems and G.P. Murdock was first putting together the Human Relations Area Files) until the academic barbarians stormed the ramparts and made camp in anthropology.

Both of these positions are based on a foundational assumption of the author; that the abandonment of final certainty leads inevitably to epistemological ruin and subjectivism. This is stated most directly, if not elegantly, about halfway through the piece.

What these statements say about themselves is that they are not true but 'partial,' that is, relative to group opinion – they say they are folkloric, conventional, tendentious, partisan, ideological, arbitrary, sophistic, parochial, or credulous – so they say they are false. And saying they are false, they contradict themselves – so they are logically false. [p. 31; also look at the overlong endnote in the next paragraph]

Rough translation: once the camel's nose of interpretive engagement was let into the tent, it was only a matter of time before the hump of epistemological nihilism followed, bringing down the whole structure, making a nonsense of terms like 'truth' and 'reality'. Folks like Geertz, who welcomed the nose but later expressed reservations about some of the rest of the beast, did not have a leg to stand on because they helped dig the ground out from under everything decades ago. Unfortunately, after the camel went through it, from the door of our tent, we could no longer see very much.

Such an argument can only be made on the most partial reading of anthropology and related disciplines, as well as a very truncated sense of intellectual history. It ignores a critique of positivism (going back to at least Dilthey in the human sciences, but existing before him in hermeneutical approaches to the Bible) that long preceded 'postmodernism'. It conflates the idea of the limits to human certainty and the role of consensus in how knowledge of the world is put together – an idea that goes back to Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* – with a strawman, willy-nilly notion of group and individual fashion.¹ Even the slippery slope argument tendered here – once you allow social construction and partialness into epistemology, maybe even ontology, then all bets are off for rigour, never mind certainty – also has at least a century-long pedigree, that is, the fundamentalist critique of hermeneutics. In other words, authors who long preceded 'postmodernism' have held positions doubting the universality of rational scientific thought or questioning the idea of a monistic 'truth' in a fashion that the author would clearly find worrisome (think of E.B. Tylor in 'Images and Names' from *The Early History of Mankind*, or William James's central thesis in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, the enormous corpus of Boas and Sapir in at least the American version of the discipline, never mind the very sticky debates about what constitutes 'truth' in science as such, from C. S. Pierce to Bruno Latour and beyond.)

Such intellectual history, however, is eschewed by the author in favour of a summary of recent debates, read as tendentiously as possible. Sokal's 'hoax' and the Freeman/Mead debate make their inevitable appearance. Here is where partialness in citing and deploying sources moves into the realm of something approaching mischief. I have little more than an interested observer status to the Sokal affair. It seems to me, however, that Sokal was attacking a mode of representing certain ideas as much as the ideas themselves. And, for all the hurt feelings and bruised egos that resulted, the exchanges around the hoax generated some light as well as the inevitable heat. The author's reading of Freeman's 'contribution' to modern anthropology, though, cannot go unanswered. Freeman's attack on Mead's Samoa (1983, 1999) work now has 20 years of critical commentary attached to it, a substantial portion of which is far from persuaded by either Freeman's facts or his arguments, practically none of which is cited by the author. The best summary to my mind is one of the early pieces, Roy Rappaport's, 'Desecrating the Holy Woman,' which, while not uncritical of Mead's pioneering work, also takes Freeman to task for ignoring the social and intellectual location of ethnographic

knowledge, the different colonial and mission histories of Samoa, and developments (as well as the social and political contexts) in anthropology – in short, for ignoring the contextual entanglements of knowledge about human beings refracted through the minds of other human beings. A nostalgia for certainty addresses none of these issues.

In the end, we cannot go back to an earlier theoretical moment and mode of representation in anthropology, but not because of an international conspiracy of feminists, postmodernists, radical subjectivists, post-structuralists and God-knows-who-else. We cannot go back to our earlier pretensions, back to pretending we have a view from nowhere, to a timeless ethnographic present, to theorising about 'cold' societies, to ignoring half the population during the course of our researches. We cannot go back to the hubristic assumptions of an older anthropology on good scientific grounds: they were inadequate to the task we set for them. These assumptions were so partial in so principled a fashion that we were forced to come up with other intellectual approaches and field methods. We are now forced to confront the limits of representations, the relationships between power and knowledge, and the irreducible ambiguity in parts of social life, precisely because it makes for better science, despite the complexities it introduces. One might as well bewail the conceptually difficult issues concerning frames of reference that Einstein introduced into measurement in physics.

We would do well, therefore, to move our metaphors for searching for knowledge away from 'cargo cults'² and towards Putnam's image of fleets of (disciplinary) boats on the sea, which can only be modified while under sail, sharing (and stealing) equipment and techniques between themselves, all the while shouting encouragement (and abuse) at one another (Putnam 1981). Thirty years of modifying anthropology's boat has resulted in a substantially larger, albeit more ungainly vessel. The discipline has had some successes – weathering some crises, seeing the term it substantially endowed with its modern meaning 'culture' gain a surprising explanatory prominence in a variety of other discourses, while maintaining and modestly expanding its institutional position. The issues that bedevil the discipline are precisely the ones being centrally engaged by the thinkers whom the author dismisses – what he offers in their place is a sterile physics envy.

Notes

1. The slippage between social construction and subjectivism is the most serious error in this piece, but the one that would take too long a reply to set right. The error is based in promiscuously moving between the technical and natural language senses of the term 'arbitrary'. The first sense contains the idea of partialness and non-necessity, but also is rule-governed and largely outside of individual consciousness and control. Language and other symbol systems are arbitrary in this sense. The second sense contains the idea of individual excess and subjective orientation, such as in the sense of 'the arbitrary exercise of power.' Note that the author's attack on the 'postmodern' thesis defence

(pp. 33–4) equates partialness with subjectivism in precisely this way. Ironically, the version of ‘subjectivity’ being narrated (in order to be heroically defeated by the author) exists as a spectre of the sort of positive knowledge the author ‘knows’ is there (it is sure of itself; it seems to have no hermeneutic depth; and it is politically insulated, insofar as a ‘native’ has no way of engaging with the research). Even more ironic, while the author uses the African man’s dismissal of this woman’s subjective sense of his tribe as evidence against her position, this man’s understanding of his tribal affiliation (by blood, land occupation, or origin myth) will also be undone by a positivist history of the sort advocated by the author.

2. Not surprisingly ‘cargo cults’ turn out to be rather sophisticated phenomena in most modern analyses than they are made out to be in this piece (see Billings 2002, Kaplan 1995).

References

- Billings, Dorothy K. 2002 *Cargo Cult As Theatre: Political Performance in the Pacific*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
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