Po-mo and SA History

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I propose to take these academic variations on the theme of post-modernism one by one and muse on their implications for future historical writing about South Africa.

First, the deconstructionist tool kit. There is every reason to applaud the renewed attention given to textual analysis as a result of post-modernist interventions. It is salutary to be reminded that history is a branch of literature and, as such, subject to critical scrutiny with rhetoric, narrative, gape and silences does indeed "open spaces" for more sophisticated understandings of what we historians do, though the critical force once employed by critical theorists after Derrida is initially intimidating, it is worth learning.

Even if we are thirty years late. The scene in the literary world today is not our quarrel. Historians are accustomed to finding useful spaces in literary productions condemned as shoddy goods by the literary intelligentsia of the day. Writing about African (and South African) historians led the charge against Euro-centric attitudes at支部ious 'quality control'.

It is at this point that most of us practicing historians get twitchy. However, the epistemological challenge too has to be faced. History as a discipline has always been to ask the "Bouxt question": what else is new already? Those who enjoy trash ing The Enlightenment generally go back to Descartes and his central, knowing subject. Cogito ergo sum? Not on your decent, uncontrollable and unknowable Nelly. In leaping for Descartes people pass over the vastly interesting figure of David Hume, who defined the sceptical position with unsurpassed clarity in his Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding and Treatise of Human Nature.

One must write as if one were a young philosopher, [he wrote] who imagines we are every moment intmitatively conscious of what we call our Self.

... Unlikely all these positive assertions are contrary to that very experience, which is pleaded for them, nor have we any idea of self, after the manner it is here explained... For my part, when I enter 'into myself', I am always troubled into what I call myself. I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or darkness, and am for ever being something or other. I can never catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.

There are some philosophers, [he wrote] who imagine we are every moment intmitatively conscious of what we call our Self.

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As for other people:

... they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an incessant rapidity, and change in a moment.

... The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. (p 258)

This led him to proclaim, if not the death, at least the decomposition, of the author:

... the true idea of the human mind, is to consider it as a system of different perceptions or different existences, which are link'd together by the relation of cause and effect, and connected, on one hand, to the non-existence, destroy, influence, and modify each other.
emism and modernity. How should historians regard these statements about the past? It may be that we should treat them seriously. They derive originally from writers outside our profession. They are put forward by Lyotard, Baudrillard and others in the same way as a manifestos than as the result of serious historical research. If, on the other hand, we take them seriously, some critical comment is necessary.

Statements about the continuing relevance of the Enlightenment and modernity are undoubtedly "truth claims" — utterly unprovable and possibly dangerous statements. About a past that we cannot reach. On this critique, post-modernists are hoist with their own petard.

Alternatively, the content of these truth claims may be tested against the record of scholarship. The works of Frank Manuel and other specialists in the history of the Enlightenment are at odds with the idea of a monolithic germant modernism. The certainties of Descartes are balanced by the scepticism of Hume. For every pig-headed conservative in modernity, there is a mocking Voltaire, disillusioned by the Lisbon earthquake, poking fun at the optimism of Dr Pangloss, giving up schemes of progress in favour of cultivating one's own garden. The notion that the Enlightenment ruled unchallenged through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries ignores the powerful anti-modernist movements that flourished over the same period. The trajectory of the Enlightenment needed a great deal of reassessment. But one of the main ideas that historicists dismiss fancied that modernity was an idea, not a fact. — and a fairly recent idea at that. Herbert Butterfield in The Whig Interpretation of History exposed the teleological assumption which informed so much previous his torical writing. E.H. Carr pointed out the precarious, provisional nature of what we call "historical facts." The historian, of science, Thomas Kuhn, argued cogently that knowledge itself is inseparably informed by the sociological apparatus that generates it and the political moorings of its advocates. What he taught us to call paradigms, Foucault serves up in French as epistemologises. Like Raphael Samuel, I call attention to these works not in order to dismiss the post-modern critique of historical knowledge, but to affirm it as the common wisdom of the best present-day practitioners.

There are other voices of post-modernism who treat the past as all too knowable. Theses of the Enlightenment "Project" as a bad experiment whose failure is proved by totalitarianism, Hiroshima, Stalin's gulags and a host of other evils allegedly caused by modernism and modernity. How should historians regard these statements about the past? It may be that we should treat them seriously. They derive originally from writers outside our profession. They are put forward by Lyotard, Baudrillard and others in the same way as a manifestos than as the result of serious historical research. If, on the other hand, we take them seriously, some critical comment is necessary.

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If we try to squeeze the last fifty years of Southern African history into this chronological Madame Tussaud’s, the results are definitely decided. How can we press a key on the National Party victory in 1948, Sharpeville, the Rivonia trials, decolonization in Central Africa and Namibia, the coup in South Africa, the Soweto uprising, the repeal of apartheid laws, Codesa and the April elections of 1994?) Unless you belong to the AHW, however, how can you get out of it?”

There are two main points I want to make about the case against progress.

The first is that it is decidedly Euro-centric and ignores most history since the death of Stalin. The second is that South Africa, as usual, appears to march to the beat of a different drum.

Just as world-weary Europeans are giving up grand narrative, South Africa brings us the final chapter to one of the grandest narratives that ever was — one that will continue to be written and rewritten.

Some confusion clouds discussions of grand and meta-narratives in post-modernist terms. Some people speak as though all narrative has been called into doubt — there are only stories, which need not be bound by the constraints of lineal space and time. Clever historians have shown that it is possible to do just that, provided the subject is a theme: for instance, a history of love, or sexuality, or corporal punishment. However, no historian who wants to write about forces operating over decades to produce a ‘grand narrative’ can get away from an underlying assumption of linear time, even if the narrative skips back and forth.

Grand narrative, when it is merely a synonym for meta-narrative, refers to works which take long time, even if the narrative skips back and forth. If grand narrative by definition implies a controlling meta-narrative, refers to works which take long time, even if the narrative skips back and forth. If grand narrative by definition implies a controlling narrative with ghoulish delight. Thus, just as world-weary Europeans are giving up grand narrative, South Africa brings us the final chapter to one of the grandest narratives that ever was — one that will continue to be written and rewritten.

Michael Ignatieff exults that the ‘grand narrative analysis that would link all these glimpses of the future together into an overarching, 19th-century style of work, in which no narrative is not so much beyond our reach as beyond any conceivable grasp’... We bourgeois neurotics may not have inherited the earth, but there is nothing preventing us from convincing ourselves that ‘The Joy of Being Lost in an Uncharted Future’, was a genuine phenomenon of historical scholarship in early twenty years. Two obvious things need to be said about this body of work...

Despite the many critics who have attacked the idea of linear time, even if the narrative skips back and forth.

The case is different with meta-narrative, which undertakes an underlying assumption of linear time, even if the narrative skips back and forth. If grand narrative is a controlling meta-narrative, refers to works which take long time, even if the narrative skips back and forth. If grand narrative by definition implies a controlling narrative with ghoulish delight. Thus, just as world-weary Europeans are giving up grand narrative, South Africa brings us the final chapter to one of the grandest narratives that ever was — one that will continue to be written and rewritten.

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The world-wide turn away from Marxism affects the future of historical writing. In South Africa more than any other aspect of post-modernism, because authors writing from a materialist or Neo-Marxist perspective have generally formally a large part in the history of historical scholarship during the last twenty years. Two obvious things need to be said about this body of work...

Second, taking post-modernism as a Marxists saw... This is the first time that post-modernism is usually produced. New journals... As good followers of E.P. Thompson, they explained in the book... As good followers of E.P. Thompson, they explained in the book...

- Van der Merwe walked again.

- She became a post-modernist in different guises depending on class position.

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