

On Postmodernism

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Postmodernism is sinuously attractive, especially to the colonized. It is gratifying to read Renato Rosaldo saying that “social analysis must now grapple with the realization that its objects of analysis are also analyzing subjects who critically interrogate ethnographers – their writings, their ethics, and their politics.” It is especially heartwarming to hear how after so many years he was finally able to connect with grief and the headhunter’s rage through his own personal sorrow, giving ethnography a dimension never before drawn.

If all of postmodernism were just Renato and Michelle Rosaldo, or even Victor Crapanzano, how comfortable it would be to settle into! But one remembers that it all started with Derrida and Foucault, and so one begins to put up one’s guard against its possible excesses.

McGee and Warms mention that postmodernism, “carried to its logical extreme, must result in nihilism.” It is not nihilism I see so much as anarchism.

If there can be no set interpretation because all interpretations are valid and yet again not valid, and “anthropological analysis can be a text within a text within a text,” (McGee and Warms) then what is the use of anthropological study, except to create disorder within disorder?

But my objections to postmodernism lie not so much in this possibility but in the premises of Foucault, whom I know more than Derrida.

Foucault’s weakness, I think, issues from his perception of the Panopticon.

Any individual, taken at random, can operate the machine: in the absence of the director, his family, his friends, his visitors, even his servants. Similarly, it does not matter what motive animates him; the curiosity of the indiscreet, the malice of a child, the thirst for knowledge of a philosopher who wishes to visit this museum of human nature, or the perversity of those who take pleasure in spying and punishing. The more numerous those anonymous and temporary observers are, the greater the risk for the inmate of being surprised and the greater his anxious awareness of being observed. The Panopticon is a marvelous machine which, whatever use one may wish to put it to, produces homogeneous effects of power. (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*)

I would call that “anxious awareness” paranoia, and attribute it to the overwhelming power of imperialist Western society over the individual. While one of Foucault’s bent would develop paranoia in such a society, an anthropologist of a more detached character would develop structuralism. It is very much different, I think, in a society as far away from the reach of imperialism (yet very much in its claws) as the Philippines. For here, the mechanisms of discipline, the Panopticons, have not yet been instituted to the extent that no one could get away from them. Here, there are still mountains to shield one from Western Panopticons. And even within the Panopticons of the Urbana and Felisas of yesteryears – the town centers, where the fraile’s spire at one end of the plaza saw all – the people exercised their full rights to tricksterism, which, being mechanisms of defensive machination, rendered them relatively less vulnerable to the oppressive machinations of the colonial power. Poor Foucault, that he was never able to taste of freedom in the Philippine isles before his untimely death.