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Combating Eurocentrism and Reinscribing Imperialist Cartography in African Scholarship

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ADAGBO ONOJA, SEP 7 2024

The family of the 'posts' (postmodernism, poststructuralism/deconstruction, postcolonialism and posthumanism) may not be an endangered family in Africa but it confronts clenched fists among a detachment of African intellectuals. This is not a recent development. But it has become a feature worthy of renewed attention in the light of the memorable formulation that every theory is for someone and for some purpose. A heightened awareness of that should alert us to how clenched fists against the 'posts' in Africa implies a preference for the theories the 'posts' arose as a critique. Seen so, clenched fists against the 'posts' equals a fatal attraction for the loser as against the winner subject position for Africa in the world structured by imperialist spatial images. By implication, clenched fists against the 'posts' speaks more to the impossibility of remaking Africa than otherwise. This is the argument this piece defends along with a clarion call for a common ground among oppositional readers of the 'posts'. This will enable a counter-geopolitics offensive for the resignification, empowerment and emancipation of the continent.

In the face of the massive collapse of capacity for resistance at a time of even more brutal local versions of 'accumulation by dispossession', the case for unclenching the fists and mastering the claims by the 'posts' as well as the empowering promise of such claims would seem to be made. To do otherwise would be a tragic re-enactment of the idea of clapping at one's own funeral which the late Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe, popularised. That is another way of capturing the paradoxical excitement of the man being led to the guillotine but who excitedly looked forward to the moment.

But a quick caveat would be in order so as not to create the impression that all of Africa is on one page as far as antagonism to the 'posts' family is concerned. There is no such thing as these theoretical standpoints are widely used in universities, research centres, civil society politics and think tanks across the continent. Officially, therefore, Africa is not antagonistic to the 'posts'. But unofficially, the 'posts' is a suspected collection of theories on the continent although this antagonism is commoner with a certain circle of established, much older members of the academic cum research community.

There's a sense in which the antagonism mirrors a disturbing complication – as revealed in Sara Marzagora's essay on the topic, especially her reporting of Simon Gikandi's rather interesting contention that "poststructural theory and its postcolonial variety, which initially help up the promise of deconstructing Eurocentrism, have actually reinscribed and reinforced it in both overt and surreptitious ways". Gikandi's statement made in 2001 is interesting in its pointed capture of the fundamental grudge underpinning the clenched fists. Still, there is a case for referencing Niyi Osundare's *African Literature and the Crisis of Poststructuralist Theorising* so as not to risk abstracting or overinvesting in a single text. Moreover, Osundare is, arguably, the most revealing of the intensity of disapproval for the 'posts' as well as the blind spots of the hostility. In a way, his contains the empirics on which Gikandi's summary could be said to stand, irrespective of whether Gikandi, the US based Kenyan professor had read Osundare, his US based Nigerian colleague. Referencing Osundare is best done by direct quotation. First, his potshot at postcolonial theory: "And besides, who needs this adumbrative tag with its own 'false notions of the universal'? Wasn't this name invented by Western Theory as a convenient nomenclatural handle on their epistemic spheres of influence?. There is a longer quote when it comes to his clenched fists against poststructuralism:

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But like Oedipus, post-structuralism's swollen foot emanated from its origin. As an 'exclusively and prescriptively Western Theory, post-structuralism has erected the West into a monumental metonym for the world, another instance of that part which considers itself larger than the whole. Because Africa (and the rest of the developing world) is absent or absented from the post-structuralist Master Theory, most of its theoretical and conceptual projects have proved grossly inadequate in the analysis and apprehension of issues and developments outside of the Western orbit.

Osundare found in Ross Murfin's edited work *Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness: A Case Study in Contemporary Criticism* the evidence for convicting poststructuralist theory of the charge of Western DNA and in its treatment of Africa, concluding that poststructuralist method and analysis have problems of "depth of perception, cogency of insight and the clarity of procedure displayed by other theories"

There is safety in generalising the clenched fist thesis from Gikandi and Osundare's vehemence because all other fists have been clenched on the same track of reasoning which, broadly, see the 'posts' as the African anti-thesis, a view which has something confounding about it from that circle. It does in the face of the massive and positive reception across Africa for Claude Ake's text, *Social Science as Imperialism*. That direction of the reception makes a paradox of the manifest hostility to the 'posts', the 'posts' being a pack of reflectivist critique of the theory of political development and its modernist roots Ake so successfully demolished.

Troubling too about the antagonism against the 'posts' is the way it fails the Professor Okello Oculi test of scholarship in Africa. Although Oculi, the Pan-African activist, was blasting Political Science in his essay, "Overcoming the Backwardness of Political Science in Africa" (the 1984 text which cannot even be found in the libraries and search machines nowadays), his point about moving the discipline from obsession with demolishing received paradigms to a horizon and scenario-sketching Political Science which could partake in worlding or world making is not an attack exclusively on Political Science. His argument certainly applies to (African) Literature. Literature has been more discerning and competent in drawing out strategies of social recovery in Africa than the rest of the disciplines and suffers relatively less from the lack of horizon sketching that informs Oculi's conclusion that there is backwardness to be overcome in African Political Science.

Stress on horizon or scenario sketching scholarship is a stress on power, the power that comes from making a particular agenda consensual. It is instructive that Oculi's scenario sketching is the same language the US National Intelligence Council (NIC) used in its 2004 report *Mapping Sub-Saharan Africa's Future* which became known as US prediction of Nigeria's implosion by 2015. Though the report was on Sub-Saharan Africa rather than on Nigeria, it is on Nigeria the experts found the possibility of the country's 'outright collapse by 2015' in the 'downside risks' section of the report. That 'prediction', more than any other variables, accounts for the fragmentation Nigeria is experiencing today because it became a site of struggle for and against Nigeria by the diverse actors contesting or amplifying it. Nigeria emerged the loser at the end of the day as the narrative of the artificiality of Nigeria and the inevitability of its implosion became reinforced, especially in the Nigerian media; as a siege mentality from overhang of the further loss of confidence in the state sedimented; as cleavages developed, with many of them quickly overgrowing the state in terms of monopoly of legitimate use of violence; with the surrender of the policy mill to the IMF/World Bank and predatory investors by a dazed and confused state; as the credibility costs mounted as in the exclusion of Nigeria from the G-20 due to an unnamed structural problem; then the takeover of leadership selection by external interests through elaborate discursive practices of funding the election management body, staging orientation programmes and election observation and the subsequent emergence of transactional leaders incapable of adding value to democratisation in a pre-industrial polity. This is the transcendent explanation for the current unspeakable mess in Nigeria because the 2004 'prediction' is only a sampler as Nigeria has been a subject of what the Nigerian establishment calls 'binoculars of the outside world' by which the metropolitan discursive space – media, civil society, academia and statecraft – is held complicit in spreading stereotypes about Nigeria and aggravating diversity in the country.

So widely held is the view of the 'prediction' as the first stage of American plan to undo Nigeria that John Campbell, the former American ambassador to Nigeria believed to be the coordinator of the dislocation plan has been trying to refute it but without much success. The more he does, the more the perception gets stronger, particularly with the

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interpretation of US ambassadorial posting to and from Nigeria in 2013 as US positioning of its experts in witnessing catastrophe.

The language game can be productive of power and a material practice. It shows up in what the US NIC's scenario sketching has done to Nigeria through what Halford Mackinder called 'philosophical synthesis' in his 1904 lecture, *The Geographical Pivot of History*. Mackinder provides the text for what Michael Heffernan has beautifully depicted as 'Eurocentric planetary consciousness' which makes geopolitics a "masculinist, ex-cathedra vision of a dangerous world viewed from the commanding heights of governmental and academic institutions". Talk about where imperialist cartography emerged from to be part of the title of this piece.

As Political Science which partakes in world making is impossible outside of the 'posts' because such theories do not subscribe to the logic of articulatory practice, the question arises as to how any of the theories in the family of the 'posts' lacks the perception, cogency of insight and the clarity of procedure displayed by other theories Osundare alleges and as agreeable to leading antagonists of the 'posts'? What could be those other theories? Structural functionalism or Marxian realism? Shouldn't anybody at all who undercuts Hegel on Africa the way Jacques Derrida has done be more interesting to African critics of Eurocentrism? Derrida has confessed his own share of Eurocentrism but Derrida is still a micro-personification of Africa: ruptured, decentered and reconstructed in a manner that he could never transcend thinking in terms of power and the production of the marginal, the stranger, the excluded and the burden bearer. Derrida taught the world to reckon with power as a treacherous realm to be suspected. His is an instructive contrast to the excessive faith in the good guy which clouds political choice in much of Africa. Shouldn't whichever perspective which produced the categories in Derrida's analysis of world politics be Africa's adopted perspective in spite of whatever percentage of Eurocentrism Derrida inhaled? In any case, the evidence from different spheres of the African imagination points at indigeneity of the poststructuralist lens in the African ontological landscape, contrary to Pal Ahluwalia argument tracing poststructuralism to colonial provocation. But even then, Ahluwalia is still an interesting reading of the tie between colonialism and poststructuralism. The point is that either way, it is a case of giving Eurocentrism unearned credit for poststructuralism rather than Africa if we do our works more critically.

How could antagonism to the 'posts' afford to disregard the symbolic and empirical significance of Derrida's activist involvement in the struggle for Algerian independence? That would be surprising as it would suggest the invalidity of the distinction Abiola Irele implied between the early poststructuralist French voices and the settler French elements in African literature – Camus and Sartre in particular – in their writings on Africa? This point is in Irele's hit essay *The African Imagination* which precedes the book of the same title? It would be even more surprising since the neo-Marxism driving the oppositional reception of the 'posts' locates change in activism as a distinct domain from interpreting the world.

Much of the foregoing can be said for postcolonialism which derives a lot and shares much with poststructuralism. Interestingly, much of the immediate post-independence African artistic philosophers belong here, be it Achebe, Soyinka, Ayi Kweyi Armah and so on. This is correct to the extent that the bulk of the works they produced speaks to the ambivalence of the postcolonial moment, the distortion and confusion created in Africa in the aftermath of the physical departure of the District Officers and other overlookers of the colonial adventure. The Middle East and South Asian geographical roots of the leading names of the postcolonial enterprise reduces if not eliminate the Eurocentrism charge against the 'posts' here unless for those who think in autarkic scale rigidities of Africa versus non-Africans.

In the African ontological landscape, posthumanism will not be adding much value to understanding of the social. The African world has always been a shared world between human beings, gods, bodies of water and ancestors. Posthumanism's problem in Africa will emanate from its centrality to intra-action, thereby throwing out discourse as a mediating variable in the human – non human ensemble. But it was discourse at work in what colonial metaphysics labeled magic, witchcraft and juju at the onset of colonialism. Happily for ontology, colonialism underdeveloped but never succeeded in dismantling all that.

I venture to argue that decoloniality is a byproduct of the 'posts' family because it could not have been possible

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without the postmodernist and poststructuralist interventions. But even in benefitting from that, decoloniality is still an African theoretical project if we follow its genealogy as traced by Leon Moosavi. He gives the credit to Ngugi Wa Thiongo, the Kenyan writer on account of Ngugi's *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature* which came out in 1986, earlier than other pioneers such as Quijano, Mignolo or Wynter. It does not make Ngugi or Africa to have the last say on matters decolonial but it suggests the primacy of an African gaze in that theoretical domain, especially that, as early as 1980, a troika in Nigeria – Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike – had published a major text: *Towards the Decolonisation of African Literature*. So, the Eurocentrism that is the problem of the earlier 'posts' does not even apply to any of the leading voices in decolonial theory as for the antagonism to the 'posts' to have any purchase in that case.

The 'posts' continue to confront hostility across the world. The question is whether the 'posts' should have encountered the kind of hostility in Africa, the part of the world that ought to embrace it most on the relative merit of its claims. Compared to the essentialist and thus colonising character of modernism, does the Eurocentrism that antagonists of the 'posts' in Africa hinge their hostility even arise to the extent of sustaining clenched fists? Without going into the history of the debates in epistemology, we can start and stop at the central critique of the modernist agenda as a dangerous manifesto which has ended up serving as the overarching condition of possibility for the horrifying anomalies in global history: empire and imperialism, colonialism, world wars, violent state practices and exclusionary tendencies that ended up defining modernism not because it is a world grave in itself but from the subject positions that the ideas of science, rationality, progress and truth produced. Science, reason and progress in this context turned out to be nothing but discursive interventions, with a colonising implication in the parts of the world outside the cultural gaze that produced them. How does it make sense that a set of theories that have pierced the modernist claim should get an oppositional reading anywhere in Africa beyond voices for plausible reformulation and refinement as and where necessary?

We can also add that there's a sense in which the thesis of *Social Science As Imperialism* forbids an oppositional reception of the 'posts' in Africa. It does because the notion of anti-imperialism as the fulcrum of scholarship in Africa which the book conveys does not suggest that the neo-Marxism it favours is the permanently adequate counter. Ake's text as a critique of the modernist framework of developmentalism carried with it, by implication, a critique of Marxism too. It bears repeating that the fascinating radicalism of the Marxian intervention did not escape the epistemological limits of the modernist gaze and its complicity in the horrors of history commonly attributed to that gaze. And there is no point dodging a re-reading of Marxism to wean it off the epistemological complications of modernism.

The 'Essex School' of discourse analysis, pioneered by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, have put on the table a more discerning way of handling the Eurocentrism that fuels African antagonism to the 'posts'. In other words, the duo did not stand on a block reading of Marxism in terms of the Eurocentric character of its epistemological grounding but opted for a double reading to produce their critique in a manner that becomes a synthesis of the 'posts'. With strong ontological points of departure, especially its characterisation of the social space as a discursive space in which what prevails as the social is an outcome of purchase secured for any particular political agenda, Laclau and Mouffe's theory of hegemony firmly places hegemony as the central category in political analysis (their own words). In other words, power is what counts and the way to power is articulatory practice, provided articulation is not conflated with grandiloquence but the practice of intertextual analysis of the everyday. In thus liberating Marxism from the trap of essentialism, poststructuralist discourse theory opens up the space for the possibility of subalterns enacting counter-hegemonic moments through radical democratic politics. So, through Laclau and Mouffe's variant of post structuralism, the 'posts' offer African actorness its best way out of the grip of Eurocentrism and empire.

In 1993 when Osundare produced his hit at the 'posts' or 2001 when Gikandi made his pronouncement are each a long way from 2024. These scholars as signifiers of the antagonism against the 'posts' in this piece need to review the stakes in the light of Okello Oculi's point about the primacy of power through visualisation. Like most senior academics, Oculi is also not a friend of the 'posts' either but his case for horizon sketching as the corner stone of scholarship in Africa makes him one. For it is through articulatory practice that materialising the world in tandem with the African imagination can become practicable, almost exactly what Achille Mbembe is saying in slightly different

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vocabulary. So, we reach a point where it would seem that a common ground between those against and those for the 'posts' is all that is missing for the African moment in a world most ready for that now more than ever before. Whatever separates the voices in that camp of reasoning, this search for common ground is compelling. The spate of coups and street actions rocking Africa now compels African intellectuals, particularly the detachment unencumbered by the day to day ordeals across Africa, to find this common ground to commence the re-imagination of the continent.

There is no alternative as the politicians are still lost in the class crisis of mission colonialism left them in. The civil society is overburdened to carry the load of transformative politics across Africa, notwithstanding what they have already contributed. National labour centres that used to serve as the umbrella have disappeared in many cases. The African universities as centres of radical articulation of popular democratic aspirations is no more if one uses Nigeria as an example. Not only has the devaluation component of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) introduced in 1986 taken a devastating toll on quality and diversity of staffing as the exchange rate regime reduced salaries to nothing, the hostility of the Nigerian State to the category of academics perceived to be complicit in "teaching what they were not paid to teach" has so aggravated the departures, including of Nigerian academics to greener pastures. "Lecturers teaching what they were not paid to teach" was a frightening hint of a Nigerian version of McCarthyism in the mid-1980s, an informed shot at university course units such as "Marxism and the Developing World", "Imperialism and Neo-colonialism in Africa", "Third World and Dependency" and the teachers of such courses.

The universities are no longer in the shape to undertake anything similar to the revolt against imperial historiography in favour of orality as a method; the debate at the University of Ibadan too on whether colonialism is better understood as an epoch or an episode; the question of whether imperialism was pioneer of capitalism in Africa and the mother of them all, the Dar debate at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, the most comprehensive conceptual disquisition that took on received wisdom on class, state, neocolonialism, socialism and much more at the. The massiveness of the collapse explains why the common ground would serve as the continental 'historic block' in this case, and at this time.

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