

Methodology versus theory: historical approaches and the problematic field of the humanities in postmodernism

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Abstract

Among diverse methodological approaches that are currently represented in the postmodern studies, the one, which dominates nowadays, is the statement that there cannot be any methodology in postmodernism per se otherwise it would be a "relapse" into constructing one more "universalizing method". Evidently, this assertion is stipulated by the highly pluralized context of the postmodern "normalization of change", the transformations of the socio- cultural order in accordance with the postparadigmatic shift of the theory. Postmodern researchers both implicitly and explicitly state that the only way to "manage" the increasing pluralism and diversity is unmasking prior modernist ideas and ideals in the individual and general meanings of the human experience. On the other hand, the postmodern methodological "openness" encourages academic ambivalence, which results in the denial of the universal notions and absolute moral values. With the apparent postmodernist accent on the interdisciplinary approaches the "scientific conditions" have become even more complicated: nowadays philosophy, history, theology, gender studies, arts are being connected with biology, genetics, cybernetics, economics, etc. As one of the main components of the postmodern intertextual analysis the historical method is vividly represented both in the western feminist theory and in the eastern post-colonial criticism, poetics of fiction and cultural studies. All mentioned above, appearing in the pluralized modes, occasion the turn into considering interdisciplinary techniques more scrupulously. The objective of this research is to reconstruct conceptually the comparative-historical methodology in the theoretical field of the postmodern humanities with the focus on the specific character of the interpretation of history in the cultural texts. The main thesis of the research reflects the reconstruction of the historical methods as an important systematic and meaning-conscious component in the postmodern theoretical studies. The research proves that nowadays historical approaches are significant and valid because they locate certain techniques into the contemporary scholarly work in order to properly utilize sources and evidences in writing "history". The value of the comparative-historical method is also based on the fact that it proposes some models and patterns in dealing with the analysis of the particular theory in the interdisciplinary studies. The historical narrative with its objective to tell the "truth" cannot be reflected according to some simple schemes, without taking into account the "hard core" role of the context in the hermeneutic reading of history. Though there is a view that historiography is located "between"



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modernity and postmodernity, the articulated point of view is that postmodernism, being a theoretical cluster of historical disruption and "brokenness", in fact, cannot reject the tradition of historicism in the humanitarian studies.

Keywords: postparadigmatic shift, interpretive approaches, interdisciplinary studies, historically-conscious analysis.

Introduction

The problem of postmodernism is considered to be linked with not only philosophic, aesthetic, or cultural spheres, not only with literary criticism and feminist studies but also with economy of late capitalism and political issues of globalization. Both theoretical approaches and evaluation of what is considered to be "the postmodern" have been represented by antimodernist and promodernist theorists, antipostmodernist and propostmodernist thinkers (Jameson, 2009, p. 61). But whatever positions can be taken, whatever terms can be used, they always try to "articulate visions of history", in which the evaluation is the object of "the political", or "the aesthetic" (Jameson, 2009, p. 55). The status of historical knowledge "after modernism" has been in the focus of the researchers since the 70s of the last century (Lyotard, Baudrillard, Ermach et al.). According to the most famous idea of Jean-François Lyotard, postmodernism can be presented as a kind of distrust to the legacy of the Enlightenment. And though postmodern critics denounce modernism using different arguments and points of view, they all seem to be united in their skeptical attitude towards Truth, Knowledge, and History as the concepts and images of the Enlightenment. On the other hand, the impact of postmodernism as the "complex of ideas" and the "climate of intellectual thought" on historiography has been much lesser than on other spheres of knowledge. W. Thompson maintains that most historical journals ignore postmodernism, and, as a rule, historians are still keeping their "empirical pathways", leaving "convinced postmodernists" in a kind of isolation. Even "sympathetic commentaries" reject the basic theoretical ideas of postmodernism (Thompson, 2004, p. 1-2). Nowadays researchers are "reexamining" the concepts and notions, associated with postmodernism, and their analysis shows the transformations of the assumptions and ideas in the conceptions of Derrida, Foucault, Rorty, Butler et al., with the accent on the key distinctions, which separate successive articulations of postmodernists (Bevir, 2012). At the present moment it is clear that many researchers conceive of postmodernism as an antiquated intellectual "habit" with the claim to update meaning-making, morality and organizing of society: metamodernism reevaluates and re-conceptualizes these notions in the context of the XXIst century's civilization drift and its subsequent focus on "histories" and the cultural heritage. The latter presumably allows meaning-making at a deep existential and emotional levels (Andersen, 2019, p. 14). Obviously, it provides some pathways to the solution of the "conflict" which has been going on over the question: "What is history?". The other very important issue is closely linked with it: "How historical knowledge can be methodologically "made up" and to what purpose?".

In the context of the uncertainty and change at the undoubtedly high level the new modes of thinking have been proposed recently producing "non-philosophy" and "humble knowledge", which are supposed to be able to unfold de-essentialized master categories, history included, in their full complexity (Storm, 2021).

Problematization of postmodern methodology and the issue of history

Recently the postmodernists have become more focused on the impact of the postmodern discourse on the contemporary debates about the possibility/impossibility of the methodology in the humanities and "science". The theorists ask questions whether the research methods have been radically revised lately due to the influence of the postmodern thinking, and to what degree it is connected with the problem of the postparadigmatic theoretical shift of the last decades. The authors of the critical papers dealing with the "postmodern turn" in methodology propose their own interpretative approaches, e.g. discursive analysis. The basis of such approach is the fact that social sciences are being in the constant motion by the "definition", their components are constantly being changed in accordance with the postparadigmatics, which gives "forms and shapes" to the research strategies used in the methodological pursuits (Susen, 2015, p. 64-82). The idea is stressed that methodology and its approaches play a key role in the conceptual and empirical attempts to interpret or explain definite aspects of the human being's reality. The importance of the methodology is reflected in the constant circulation of the claims for the Truth, especially in the academic debates. The discursive analysis is not only one of the current examples of the fact to what great extent the research methods are still under the influence of the postmodern trends, but it also illustrates the degree of the impact of those methods on the ways of the researchers' analysis of the socio-cultural objects. Generally speaking, it is an "interpretative turn" in the methodology of the humanities, which proclaims that the hermeneutic analysis of an individual and the society is one of the key tasks of the contemporary analytical or critical work (Mouzelis, 2008).

It should be stressed that the phenomenon, which F. Jameson calls "theoretical discourse", does not include only Marxism, poststructuralism, feminism, and literary criticism, - postmodern researchers re-conceptualize history and culture mainly in terms of the "collective discourses" (Hassan, Newman, Wild, et al.). The latter is, in fact, what historiography has been doing for centuries with the only difference that postmodernists accentuate namely problematization of the relations of history, reality, and language (Hutcheon, 2000, p. 15).

Western scientists engaged in the historical analysis try to "balance" the historical component, that what is called "construction", and that what is the "reality of life", some of them prove the necessity of both, - the former and the latter (Hacking, 2000). The diversity of the ambivalent ideas, no doubt, encourages academic freedom, creativity and interdisciplinary openness (Pernecky, 2016).

On the other hand, the tendency to underestimate the methodological basis in the scientific research is one of the vivid evidences of the present dominating position of the postmodern pluralism: any subjective position can claim the status of the general and complete theory. No doubt, the absence of the objective approaches leads to the pathway of relativism, and the latter is generally accepted as one of the epistemological indices of postmodernism. However, in the postmodern studies historicism has not disappeared. Moreover, since the beginning of the 'postmodern era' it has been applied as one of the main worldview principles. The theoretical exploration of the 'vast dialogue' between the centuries, histories and literatures is known to be initiated, - among some others, - by U. Eco: the stories, which are told in his "The Name of the Rose" are those of literature, and those of history (Hutcheon, 2000, p. 128).

Still after half a century's postmodern research the "change" and the "difference", being the main structural components of the drift to the postparadigmatic order, make scientists admit the evident necessity of the return to the theoretical reflection of the "histories", which de facto are present, because the transformed and still transforming world has evidently had its "histories, which ought to be analyzed in the sphere of "historicism". Nowadays it is not just a traditional principle of the analysis, it turns out to be one of the main interpretive models. Obviously, there is a certain paradox: on the one hand, historicism operates as a kind of guarantor of the scientific objectivity, on the other, – it acts subjectively in the postmodern "play" of the hermeneutic approaches.

Comparative-historical meanings in postmodern reflection of the humanities

G. Deleuze maintains that freedom as the idea of the Superperceptible world includes thinking of the objective reality due to the moral laws. As it is understood, the great postmodernist asserts that the psychological idea of soul and the theological idea of the Super being get their objective reality being submitted to some moral laws. G. Deleuze (2001, p. 189-190) concludes his speculations with the statement that imagination itself is a real part of the common moral feeling. The theorist stresses that the realization of freedom in the sensitive-conscious world implies Man's initial synthesis of his activities, – and History means that realization. After fifty years of accentuating the 'current moment' nowadays scientists declare that their analysis is not, in fact, a postmodernist one because they take into account both the tendencies of the postmodern analysis and the fundamental epistemological assumptions of the classical theorists, namely, their connection with "common moral feeling" and historical methods.

However, the latter cannot be treated precisely as classical historical methodology: the scientists maintain that history is the combination of the events and the stories we tell about them. And there arise two questions: what access do we have to events and what is the interrelation of the event and the narrative? Even the most radical postmodernists agree that events exist in reality, though they all accentuate that those events have to be filtered through the human mind, which is in itself shaped by experience, culture and society (Heringer, 2018). In other words, they put the focus on the "context" in its broad socio-cultural meaning. Slavoj Žižek persists in asking a question: "What is really happening when something happens?" The outstanding postmodernist addresses the fundamental problems: "To what degree are we agents of our own fates? Which conditions must be met for us to perceive that something is really existing? In a world, which is constantly changing, is anything new really happening?" (Žižek, 2014). All said above is directly connected with the postmodern notions of narrative, discourse, context and history. "Man is an animal who tells histories" is a famous sentence, and it gives a basis for the assertion that any culture is determined and exists thanks to the definite "histories", which identify its representatives and are identified by them (Wheeler, 1991).

In the context of this article the problem of discourse is very important because discourses can operate exclusively in the way of "histories". The summary of "histories" forms Man's/Woman's outlook, and it is namely discourses that determine a person's choice, which events he/she should develop into histories, and which not. Thus, the problem of the narrative is of great significance in the approaches of such kind. The historical narratives with their objective to tell the "truth" about the past cannot be considered in accordance with a simple scheme, and historical knowledge cannot be proposed as some kind of general paradigm of consciousness. It is stressed that in order to comprehend the ability of a narrative to tell the

truth, we should understand historians' intentions and spheres of their communication. Postmodern historiography has evidently broken its links with the traditional epistemology and has been concentrated on texts since Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger and others shifted their focus of the analysis from ideas in the individual's mind to the language, in which thinking is expressed. At present people (ordinary men and women) have left their naivety believing in the historical texts, they have begun to comprehend to what degree the representation of life in its past, present and future is structured in accordance with the deeply-rooted frames of the historical texts hidden in our consciousness. Though some theorists claim that nowadays historiography is between modernism and postmodernism, the point of view, which is shared by many postmodern researchers, is that postmodernism cannot follow modernism in a kind of sequence because this would be an admission of historic progress and a relapse into the Grand narrative mythology (Appignanesi, 2006, p. 114). Scientists ask fundamental questions: "What is it in studying history? How can anything be learnt objectively in studying the past? Generally speaking, is there the objective truth per se, and will we be able to comprehend the historical truth whenever?". In their answers to these questions researchers claim that despite the impression of the fragments, the postmodern history of the last decades is a coherent discipline. While proposing their research methods scientists are fully conscious of the fact that historical knowledge is greatly stipulated by the character of the original texts and those methods, which historians use. Still of great significance is the fact that there is no unanimous methodology in the historical research, eclecticism and connection of different methods is a fact, which should be taken into account. And though historical approaches have contributed greatly to the humanities there are few monographic investigations about what this method is de facto nowadays; there are few discussions concerning this issue in the cultural studies, literary criticism, and social sciences.

Problems of theory and practice

The importance of the historical method is also based on the fact that it proposes some patterns in dealing with a serious problem, which all the humanities face: the balance between the methods of a particular science and interdisciplinary approaches in methodology. Generally speaking, there is an obvious tendency to recognize the significance of the latter in a number of the research fields: in history, theology, cultural studies, anthropology, political science, gender studies, political philosophy, sociology, etc. (Lange, 2017). It is worth mentioning the famous words of Gayatri C. Spivak who said in one of her interviews:

"I am a very eclectic person. I use what comes to hand. ... Within literary criticism, quite often an interdisciplinary practice means nothing more than neutralizing the vocabulary from another discipline and taking it to describe again what happens between reader and text" (Spivak & Harasym, 1990, p. 55).

There is one more appropriate example connected with G. Spivak's creative work. If we look up the contents of her authoritative monographic book "In Other Worlds", we will see that it comprises literary studies, feminism, culture studies, post-colonial criticism, Marxism, deconstruction, history, etc., – quite a wide range of disciplines and subjects, which the famous scientist analyses using, de facto, interdisciplinary approaches. What is even more significant in this context is G. Spivak's usage of the classical historical method in her postmodern "Feminist Readings: Dante-Yeats", in her "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography",

in her essay on Wordsworth, etc., - it is the historical insight of the author, which – among others - provides many interesting discoveries for the readers of her book (Spivak, 1988).

However, it should be added that the historical analysis is still debated by different scientists from various standpoints, e.g. the epistemological point of view: some researchers reject the possibility of scientific knowledge in the social sciences. Their argumentation lies in the impossibility to decipher social laws because of the complexity of the social relations: the discourses impede the scientific study of the social phenomena, that is why “understanding” is not possible (Tosh, 2015). Among various debates the following problems are more often mentioned by the contemporary scientists in their usage of the historical methodology: history has not been recorded accurately or reliably; there is always the problem of exceptions, and it is difficult to recognize the proper way of dealing with them; it is a very complicated problem how to decide that namely this factor, and not the other, is what causes some outcome. However, historical methods are worth their long-time significant role because they compromise certain approaches and rules that researchers follow in order to properly utilize sources and historical evidences in writing “history”. Here we cannot help but make a remark concerning history and hermeneutics. If we deal with the conflicting ideas and ambivalent accounts in different texts, if we, as true scientists, try to be objective (whatever it means now) and come to the valid conclusions, should our methods be historical or interpretive/hermeneutic ones? Should our guide be rationality or intuition? The questions are obviously open to discussions.

The postmodern historicism is considered to be connected with the postmodern intertextuality: no text is without its intertext, no text is alone but interlinked with the tradition that came before it, - declared postmodern thinkers. Gayatri Spivak (1988), for example, vividly shows how “histories” and texts can be imprinted in all “cartography” aspects of the world. In this context it is worth mentioning that the historical methods have been widely used by the feminist theorists since the 70s of the last century (C. Pateman, S. Okin, T. Moi, S. Gilbert, S. Gubar et al.). Analyzing both the scientific texts and fiction with the help of the palimpsest techniques, they have managed to show to what degree the meanings are related to the established dogma because of the explicitly or implicitly articulated sets of “historically determined and determining notions, presuppositions, and practices” (Spivak, 1988, p. 97).

Coming back to the line of reasoning about the hermeneutic analysis and the methods of its research, we have to recollect the remarkable words of Sergey Averintsev concerning the interpretation problems of the Biblical texts. The outstanding scientist writes that for the Christianity the historical time is important by the “doctrine”: the historical date – “under Pontius Pilate” – is included in the Symbol of faith (Averintsev, 2001, p. 370).

Conclusion

Despite the postmodernists’ attempts to proclaim the impossibility of methodology in the contemporary science, it should be accentuated that methodology still plays a significant role in the conceptual and empirical research, in explaining definite aspects of human beings’ reality, definite concepts of perceiving the reality in the reflections concerning such absolutes as Truth, God, Virtue, the Good, and what Man/Woman’s life means in the postmodern world in relation to the universal notions of moral laws. With the recognition of the great impact of the hermeneutic interpretation on all the aspects of the humanities, there goes alongside the

theoretical discourse of history, which exerts its influence on Marxism, poststructuralism, literary criticism, gender studies, etc. Proponents of the historical approaches to the scientific analysis, being well-conscious of the interrelations of history and reality, reality and language, etc., are still trying to balance "construction" and the real life. It should be noted that at present there exists a tendency to determine the limits of ontology while putting an accent on the universal issues in methodology and connecting them with the history of science. The relativity as one of the main features of postmodernism, being stipulated by the accent on the "context" and narrative concepts, now takes its "vital forces" from both the narrative and the interpretation, because any event is "shaped" in the mind of an individual, whose "attitudes" are shaped by his/her life's context: socio-cultural and ideological "histories" and discourses. Moreover, the historical narrative with its objective to tell the "Truth" about the past is considered to be ambivalent due to the "postparadigmatic order" of postmodernity.

Though some theorists claim that at present historiography is between modernism and postmodernism, the point of view accentuated in this paper is that historical methods are de facto theoretically connected with modernism, nowadays, - with the prospects of metamodernism.

As hermeneutics has a historical rather than a speculative starting point (Friedrich Schleiermacher), historical methods are widely employed in the studies of the interpretive phenomena. The problem is stipulated by the fact that in postmodernity there is no "view from nowhere": all is ever determined by context. Still much of the postmodern literary critical work is being closely connected with the historical approaches to the context, and this intention is often expressed in the series of markers, which can determine the way to the future development of the objective approaches to history. As the problematizing issue in the postmodern debates the historical method seems to be tied up both with the western poetics and eastern post-colonial analysis, feminist theory and cultural studies. In all likelihood the historical method is represented as the component of the intertextual analysis, - the transcending dialogue of values and notions of the past and the present. The significance of the historical method is also based on the supposition that it proposes some models in dealing with the balance between the particular science methods and interdisciplinary studies. The historical method, though having lost its dominating role in the humanities, literary criticism and theology, is still a valuable scientific tool mainly because it compromises certain postmodern techniques and rules, which scientists follow in order to properly utilize sources, "histories", narratives and the discourses of different "texts" in the broad meaning of this word.

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