THE SOCIAL GOODS OF COVID-19

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Abstract

The world has never seen a pandemic that is more life-threatening than COVID-19. Erupted in the Hubei province in Wuhan, China, in December of 2019, the virus not only succeeded in spreading—quickly—outside China, it also thrive in killing tens of thousands of people around the world. Thus, researchers and health commentators have spoken and written extensively about the health and social ills of the virus, arguing that the disease has disrupted the global economy, halt international and domestic movements, and impose self-isolation, quarantine, and lockdown. This article looks at the COVID-19 phenomenon in different angle. Using the theory of postmodernism, the paper argues that COVID-19 has brought some social goods: It has busted the myth of science as the universal truth, shows that irrationality of human behavior, and proves that medical knowledge cannot cure every ailment. Through secondary data analysis, the paper concludes that as few western societies boast of their technological development, coronavirus has reminded the world that modern technological know-how, while they are effective in some way, they cannot remedy a pandemic. Different ideas and opinions of people from different cultural background are needed to curtail the scourge of COVID-19. Thus, in the wake of a pandemic like this, our world need unity, love, and specific kinds of knowledge that are useful for solving specific health and social problems.

***Keywords**: COVID-19, Postmodernism Theory, Sociology, Nigeria*

Introduction

"The surreal atmosphere of the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed fault lines in trust among human beings, among countries, between citizens and governments, and it is pushing us to raise big questions about ourselves, our social relationships, and life generally. And this crisis is not just limited to public and

> *environmental health or the economy – what we are witnessing is a moment of truth regarding the crisis of late modernity and its capitalist system on a broad, overarching scale"* (Hanafi, 2020:2)***

During the past seven months, COVID-19, an infectious disease caused by the novel coronavirus, has disrupted the global economy, halt international and domestic movements, and forced people to stay home. The disease, since its first outbreak in the Hubei province of Wuhan in China in December of 2019, has emerged and reemerged to become a pandemic of a global proportion, infecting millions and killing tens of thousands of people around the world (Johnson, 2020). As the scourge of the virus waxed, world leaders, medical experts, health organizations, and researchers have struggled to wane the spread of the virus by introducing stricter measures—putting a ban on both international and domestic traveling, forcing the wearing of face mask, and institutionalizing the practice of physical distancing—yet, the disease has only grown in severity with more people contracting the virus from index cases and community transmissions.

As the virus continues to spread, its impact is growing in intensity. This development has revived the interests of social scientists, especially in the field of sociology, where recent studies have been intrigued by the COVID-19's negative impacts, and asking question—critical question demanding to understand how the disease has become a disaster and risk to human life, to public health systems, and the economy in general (Lavell et al., 2020). Moreover, other studies have viewed the virus beyond the scope of health and illness, but more so as a "public health emergency" that is fast becoming a "human rights crisis" (Guterres quoted in Wintour, 2020). The negative consequences of the virus have also extended to a point where it has caged humanity in lockdown and forced the world to a standstill. In fact, "many of us are confined to our homes facing an uncertain future in which, even if most of us survive, economic mega-crisis is likely" (Žižek, 2020, p. 85).

This paper consists of three parts. The first part deals with postmodernism—the theoretical foundation within which this paper is situated. What is the central thesis of postmodernism? How does the theory explain the global pandemic of COVID-19 in today's modern societies? The remaining two parts deal with how the novel coronavirus debunks the social myths of the so-called human rationality and the powers of modern societies. And they ponder on the following questions: Why science has not cured COVID-19 disease? Where are

the millions of doctors in the world? Are there diseases that modern medicine does not cure?

The Theoretical Perspective

We situate this paper within the context of postmodernism. To define postmodernism, modernism has to be defined first, because the latter is the opposite of the former. Modernism embraces the Enlightenment assumptions concerning the power of human rationality, reason, and logic; the power of science in running the social world and in guiding our understanding of the human condition; and the prospects of grand theories in solving social problems (Faigley, 1992). Typically, modernism came about in the modern period characterized by industrialization, market-oriented capitalist economies, new social classes, Enlightenment values, and democracy (Elaati, 2016, p. 1). Postmodernism challenges those basic assumptions.

As a new theory in the field of sociology, postmodernism was propounded by French sociologists Jean Francois Lyotard (1984) and Jean Baudrillard (1994), and the central question the theory sets to answer is as follows: Has the Enlightenment project been abandoned in the 21st-century modern world? Postmodernist scholars believe that the Enlightenment has been completely abandoned in today's modern world, and their argument is constructed on two main premises. First, postmodernist contends that the search for truth has been abandoned. People no longer believe in rationality or the notion that "human progress" could only be achieved through "rational change" (Harvey, 1990). People do not search for the truth because there are no universal truths; and people no longer believe in the prospects of science or the promises of grand theories as solution providers for the world's problems (cf. Lee & Newby, 1983). In all of these, people, today, consider all these promises, put forward by the Enlightenment philosophers, as a mere "denotative language-games;" people only try to impose their opinions on society; the denotative language games are but a "move to win the game of society" (Lyotard, 1984). But, in reality, it has neither use nor real impact in shaping the world around us.

Second, people no longer search for the truth because the word "truth" is subjective, according to the postmodernist scholars. There is no ultimate truth because people's opinions are diverse, complex, and multifaceted. Thus, everything and anything goes—in as far as no one takes it seriously. Under this notion, the word "truth" does not matter, according to postmodernists; what matters, instead, is what the postmodern scholars referred to as the "technical language-games" (also known as the usefulness of the truth). It is argued that in today's modern world, people only seek knowledge that is important, useful,

and saleable (Lyotard, 1984). Table 1 briefly summarizes the differences between modernism and postmodernism.

Modernism	Postmodernism
Science is objective	Science is subjective
Truth is universal	Truth is diverse
Grand theorists offer objective reality	Grand theorists offer "meta-narratives"
Rationality is the source of knowledge	Rationality is not a source of knowledge; it is an ideology
Democracy is a universal truth	Democracy is not a universal truth; it is part of a western ideology

Source: Slightly borrowed from Lester Faigley's *Fragments of Rationality (1992)*

With all the abundant knowledge and numerous virologists in the world, in addition to the many theorists and medical procedures available, COVID-19 is still out there, and it is still killing more people than any other disease in the history of the world (WHO, 2020). This uncertainty automatically puts human rationality and the medical profession to scrutiny. If human rationality is above and beyond any other thing, why does it fail to curtail the scourge of the novel coronavirus? Where are the prominent medical experts in the world? Why are humans more confused today—in the wake of the pandemic—than at any time before? What happened to the medical studies that are claiming to be solution providers to new ailments, diseases, and social problems? The modern world stands still—confused even—as the coronavirus, which used to be a disease in early January but has now transitioned to become a deadly pandemic audaciously kills tens of thousands of lives across the globe (WHO, 2020).

With this, people no longer held the so-called science as the solution to all the problems in the world. This is the reason why individuals across the globe are using different medications to cure COVID-19 disease. Boldly defying medical practitioners' directives, many people are using hydroxychloroquine to tame the virus (e.g. U.S. President) while others are taking traditional medicine hoping to find a new antidote to the deadly virus (e.g. Madagascar, Nigeria, and Guinea Bissau among others). Drawing from the postmodern theory, we argued that, far from what several studies have written about the negative impact of COVID-19, the virus has some positive social goods, for it has debunked three social myths that are central to sociological discourses. The COVID-19 has busted the myth of human rationality, the myth of scientific discoveries, and the myth of the "superpowerism" of the modern world.

The Myth of Human Rationality

The driving force behind the Enlightenment's movement in the 1680s was the notion that logic, science, and human rationality were the causes of human progress (Harvey, 1990). If only humans were to put their logic into action, the enlightenment philosophers presumed, and take their faith into their own hands, everything would be different: The social ills that bedeviled the pre-enlightenment societies—the unification of churches in the affairs of the state, the traditional sentiments and dogmatic beliefs—would have withered away and replaced with social goods: Democracy, freedom, and the goods of science, human reason, and thoughts (Heywood, 2012). Unfortunately, historical events have debunked this notion in different occasions, across time and space. The assumption that human rationality is the ultimate answer to social woes is such a weak one. To begin with, what is rationality? And why do the Enlightenment thinkers thought of it as the ultimate answer to the world's social problems?

Human rationality encompasses wisdom, reason, and logic. It is a good thing for a human to be rational, for it is part of human nature and it is what separates humans from animals. However, that does not mean that individuals' rational thoughts are always lucid and balanced; by nature, people do not always think rationally because of the weaknesses and biases embedded in the human psyche. No human is complete; people make mistakes all the time. This is true for the killings and wars and horrendous things that humans did in the past and are still doing in the present. Pharaoh, as the Enlightenment thinkers would like to argue, thought of himself as a rational human being. And so he defied Moses' call, separation of church from the state, just like what the Enlightenment project advocates, while claiming to be a reasonable leader of the Egyptian people. But Pharaoh ruled Egyptians with iron-clad, dictatorial leadership, killing whom he likes, when he likes, without "sound reason" and justifiable causes. In the end, Pharaoh drowned and ends a miserable life (Book of Exodus, 13:17-14:29; Quran 10:90).

The First World War, too, can substantiate the irrationality of human judgment; his not-so-reasonable decision-making processes; his selfish and bigot character, and behavior. Adolf Hitler exterminated Jews based on the assumption of human rationality, based on the pretext that he wanted freedom for Germans, which is of course, at the expense of millions of Jews' life (Brosnan, 2018). Jewish, on the other hand, would argue that Hitler was no rational human, but an irrational, blood-sucking dictator. Rationality, then, is a subjective term. One can call himself a rational being, imposed those sentiments on his congregation, and do miserable things. The same can be said of the COVID-19 outbreak. Though the genesis of the virus is not yet identified,

scholars suggest that coronavirus has a "zoonotic source" (WHO, 2020, p. 2). In other words, the disease transmitted from animals to humans through close contact. WHO (2020) reported that the full genetic sequence of SARS-CoV-2 from the early human cases and the sequences of many other virus isolated from human cases from China and all over the world since then show that SARS-CoV-2 has an ecological origin in bat populations.

All available evidence to date suggests that the virus has a natural animal origin and is not a manipulated or constructed disease (WHO, 2020). If humans were rational, why do they come into close contact with animals? Moreover, when the virus first erupted in December of 2019, the doctors were rational enough: They quickly informed the Chinese authorities but what do the authorities do with such critical news? They censored it under the pretext of "avoiding panic," and went on further to "coerced the doctors to uncover the news, accused other countries of spreading the virus, and complained indignantly about the 'politicization' of the virus's origin" (Johnson, 2020).

COVID-19 has played an important role here by debunking the argument of the superiority of human reason. The truth is human rationality does not always result in human progress, in social development, in good governance, or peaceful diplomatic relations between countries, as the coronavirus pandemic proves. And realizing this fact is important to our social survival as people. This is because only when we concede the flaws of human reason, that leaders would come together to a negotiating table and better communicate and device policies that will bring meaningful social progress to citizens and communities.

The Myth of the Modern World

The First World countries—the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Canada—are part of the modern world. These countries are said to be economically buoyant and socially developed, according to the modernist scholars. For instance, Rakhi (2011, p. 16) posits that modern states are "wealthier and more powerful, and their citizens' freer, with a higher standard of living." For modernists, the modern world is finer. Driven by science, governed by democracy, and guided by the spirit of freedom and equality, the modern world is said to have moved from traditional to the modern, mass consumption stage. Modern societies set the standard; they laid the modern economic, political, and social structures of capitalism, democracy, and a technologically-driven, industrialized environment. And the rest of the Third World countries of Asia, Middle East, and Africa must follow the template of the modern societies—the underdeveloped Third World countries must be willing and able to move from traditional to the modern stage. Any

Third World country that fails to follow these processes of modern development is looked down on to, labeled as traditional, as backward and barbaric (Rostow, 1960).

But what is the validity of this argument? While the modern worlds are economically strong, in some way, that does not make them perfect or role models of development. To be perfect is to be just and fair; that is why the world abhors Hitler and adores Mandela. However, in the case of the economically rich, powerful modern nations, there is always the question of the legitimacy of their character and might to begin with. Looking back in history, one can safely say that Europe has attained its economic might not because of its intellects or productive population; but it has gained its super-power status through the illegal use of its strong military force, which it uses to economically exploits, socially degrade, and politically oppress weaker countries of the world, including Nigeria through its inhuman act of slavery, bloody colonialism, and capitalist agenda (Lief, 2015). By creating an unjust system of "capitalist world economy," where economic resources are configured to flow from a "periphery" of poor and underdeveloped states to a "core" of wealthy states through systematic imperial and neo-colonial exploitation, enriching the latter at the expense of the former (Wallerstein, 1974; Patrick, 2013), the modern underdeveloped societies have lost their so-called perfectionism, and, with it, their legitimate authority to lead the world by example.

Second, COVID-19 has revealed the limitations of science and the frailty of the modern states—in terms of their perceived technological might and resolve to manage crises. For example, today, there are more COVID-19 deaths and cases in the modern world than in the undeveloped world (WHO, 2020). As of 16th July, Europe has more cases of COVID-19 deaths (204, 449) than Africa (8, 650) as Table 2 indicates. While the reason for the increase cases and death may be attributed to other variables, such as population and the position of a nation (the U.K., for example, attracts more foreigners than say, Nigeria, because of its friendly-economic environment), the handling of the virus by the leaders of the modern states is abysmal, and it is one of the top reasons why the countries are among the worst hit by COVID-19.

Situation in numbers (by WHO Region)
Total (new cases in last 24 hours)

Globally	13 150 645 cases (185 836)	574 464 deaths (4 176)
Africa	506 124 cases (13 464)	8 650 deaths (220)
Americas	6 884 151 cases (103 723)	290 674 deaths (2 244)
Eastern Mediterranean	1 317 078 cases (14 781)	32 294 deaths (543)
Europe	2 964 046 cases (17 942)	204 449 deaths (492)
South-East Asia	1 231 014 cases (34 363)	30 570 deaths (670)
Western Pacific	247 491 cases (1 563)	7 814 deaths (7)

Conclusion: The Future is "Technical Language-Games"

The article has argued that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought some social goods in our world. Drawing from the theory of postmodernism, the article contends that the pandemic has debunked the prospects of science, the notion that rationality is the basis for social progress, and the belief that grand theories offer lasting solutions for world's problems. However, we have contended that reason and human rationality are subjective; they do not always help in the pandemic-stricken world in as much as science did not help in controlling the spread of COVID-19, even in the so-called modern economies. There is much more confusion about lockdown measures in the UK and total denial about the health risks of the virus by President Trump in the U.S. than in other developed countries. Thus, though COVID-19 posed a threat to our lives, it nonetheless introduced some social goods, as it exposed the so-called super-power status of the western world and the limit of science and medical health.

To mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in our world, the focus should be on technical language-games—on useful knowledge. In other words, research should be geared to the knowledge that is practical and valuable to people, communities, and societies. Since the world is diverse (with over 7 billion people living in different regions and sharing different cultures, religion, and ethnicity), government officials and policy-makers should seek ideas, opinions, and expertise from different parts of the world, not confined their thought within the boundaries of science and the ideas of a few people from the western world. Furthermore, since COVID-19 has uncovered the irrationality of world leaders, which is evident in the way they handle the pandemic and fight each other in the global stage, authorities should focus on strengthening social relations that are purposeful and useful. Instead of establishing a relationship with allies because of their social capital, economic power, influence, or other political benefits, leaders should endeavor to build diplomatic social relationships with their colleagues to bring peace, attain social progress, end the chaos, and solve health-related issues. Thus, when governments at all levels unite together in the spirit of brotherhood to defeat the common enemy—in this case, the COVD-19 pandemic—a lot of great ideas and opinions will be generated by different folks from diverse territories. This will bring more diverse ideas, eliminate the opinionated meta-narratives of science, and ultimately increase the opportunity costs of the pandemic.

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