Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm, Metamodernism: The Future of Theory

Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 2021, 328 Seiten

Miriam Hamburger

This text was automatically generated on 23 June 2023.

Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm, Metamodernism: The Future of Theory

Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 2021, 328 Seiten

Miriam Hamburger

REFERENCES

Storm, Jason Ānanda Josephson. 2021. *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, USA. 328 Seiten, Paper: $30.00, Cloth: $95.00, PDF: $29.99. ISBN: 978-0-226-78665-0.

1   Considering the social and ecological crises facing the planet, some may wonder if academia is an altogether useless enterprise, one irreparably fraught with colonial and extracting hierarchies; a project incapable of salvation. Skepticism over the coherence and usefulness of such categories as »religion« or »culture« and even the prospect of truly relevant knowledge production have been brought under harsh criticism by both the political right and left as »intellectually or ethically compromised« endeavors (p. 1). At the juncture of politics and scholarship, *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory* is a book that aims to demonstrate that academic research in the humanities is not only still possible but entirely necessary, both for research's sake and for understanding social inequity. Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm deconstructs the contemporary »postmodern« *zeitgeist*, leading scholars to an analytical toolkit to consider the future of theory.

2   Storm, a Professor in the Department of Religion and Chair of Science and Technology Studies at Williams College, Williamstown, MA, United States, presents five postmodern theoretical issues within humanities scholarship. The philosophical postmodernism he describes utilizes concerns from debates in semiotics, especially considering discrepancies between language and meaning. These theories propose that »language

does not reflect reality outside of it and no theory—scientific or otherwise—can objectively represent the social and natural world [...]. Post-modernism can be philosophically associated with an unsystematic skepticism against faith in rationality, objectivity, and scientific knowledge« (p. 23-24). Storm also rightly places these issues among decolonial as well as anthropocentric critiques. Anyone confronted with dogmatic skepticism will be pleased to find each of these issues drawn to their logical conclusions and exposed for their philosophical errors. Storm argues that such academic conversations are not far from claims to »alternative facts« in a »post-truth« society. He considers these doubts seriously for their intentions, making him stand apart from other critics of the culture of doubt.

3   The author illustrates how the anxiety between language and meaning can lead social scientists to a standstill, where facts are relative, and no overarching theory can be truly relevant to reality. His ultimate solution to the paralysis of postmodernity is called »metamodernism«, where »meta« stands for a higher, second-order structure of thought that suggests a holistic and recuperative way forward. It offers a useful and contemporary perspective on how theory works and how language operates that mines historical Western philosophical scholarship, notably that of Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Theodor Adorno, G. W. F. Hegel, Charles Pierce Sanders, Willard Van Orman Quine, and Jakob Johann von Uexküll. He also integrates Japanese and Indian philosophers, such as Tanabe Hajime (田辺元) or Bimal Krishna Matilal.

4   The book reads easily like a textbook; the first, second, and third chapters are mostly devoted to deconstructing social construction, whereas the fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters contain possible constructions available to scholars for creating new theories. He begins in Part One by deconstructing the claim that social constructions are less »real« than physical reality; what he calls the claim to antirealism. From there, he moves to the trouble with essentialized master categories such as »religion«, remarking on the challenges they pose for disciplinary study. Parts Two and Three discuss the concern of the possibility of cultural translation, for example, how one might explain and thereby interpret a specific religious practice (or how one might even name something »religious« in the first place). This kind of translation is directly related to the possibility of communicating and facilitating understanding between cultures. Part Four considers the difficulty of presenting facts without positioned value judgments, and finally, the necessity of the connection. There, Storm also attacks the broad climate of cynicism that sows doubt into »facts«, demoting them to mere positioned worldviews.

5   In the first chapter after the opening, Storm suggests that claims of antirealism present an imperfect dichotomy from the start. Social construction and physical materiality have never stood at opposite poles, rather, they are co-constitutive, the linguistic forming the material and vice versa. This conversation is highly relevant for debates in the academic study of religion, such as the debates concerning the existence of »religion« *sui generis* or the tension between lived, material religion and the concept of belief. This conversation is also relevant for differentiating between the possibility of subjective and objective knowledge. Storm transparently and succinctly attacks the ideal of an objective reality, related to the concern over the existence of a reality outside of discourse.

6   The conversation that disentangles the connection between the »real« and »socially constructed« lays the groundwork for reconsidering language and its function, especially with regard to categories such as »religion«. Storm himself has always resisted disciplinary categorization: from the start of his education, he found it puzzling that in order to study Buddhism, he would have to do so in a department of religious studies rather than philosophy. He aims in Chapter 2 to expose the fragile boundaries of these categories and also to demonstrate how each discipline has already faced a self-reflexive crisis, which is helpful for analytical study. After deconstructing each category, however, Storm reconstructs them for continued use, thereby defending the status quo in an alternative style. Rather than a Weberian typology, Storm suggests dynamic clusters of potential that each category holds, developing an idea of powers. In this sense, Storm defends the status quo of conceptual categories with refreshing arguments.

7   Storm aims to leave no jargon unexplained by deconstructing philosophical terms, theories, and theorist personalities in a layered historical context. Indeed, the author illuminates the »turns« of the last fifty years not as »intellectual innovations« but rather »the translation of older scholarly vocabulary into new jargon« (p. 19, historic turn p. 3, linguistic turn, p. 152). Nevertheless, Storm falls somewhat short of his ambition to reduce jargon to a minimum as he invents his own within the concept metamodernism, where he suggests »hylosemiotics« for new theoretical tactics for construction (Chapter 5) and »zezeticism« for the future of analysis (Chapter 6).

8   Hylosemiotics are Storm's answer to whether interpretation is at all possible in the aim of scholarship. The main purpose of metamodernism is both: to bring understanding on human behavior that moves beyond cultural particularism and towards broader theories on how societies function. Storm uses hylosemiotics to pay attention to non-textual communication through indirect impulses from the material, the environment, and of animals, yet distinguishes the methodology from New Materialism and Materialist concepts of agency. He does this by striking a stark contrast to authors such as Rosi Braidotti, Karen Barad, and Jane Bennett, arguing that meaning can be derived from a sign, not in terms of the capacity of that sign for referral or agency, but rather, it's interpretation is possible in the context of its relative position within a sign system (p. 159-162). Especially notable are Storm's connections between New Materialist assemblages and structuralist structures: he argues that New Materialist vocabulary is largely drawn from post-structuralism (he references the term »actant« and »assemblage«, for example) and that, ironically, terms such as »network« are doing the work for physical material that the term »structure« had done for language (p. 160). These methodologies are not completely mistaken, but their origin stories and interdisciplinary usage expose obstacles in their effect.

9   Storm does not dismiss postmodernist skepticisms as weak or without cause. Instead, he acknowledges their genuine theoretical issues and uses them not as an endpoint but as the foundation for a useful theoretical framework. »Zezeticism« compiles this pragmatic approach to doubt. Rather than using doubt indiscriminately, Storm suggests a line of reasoning which dismisses implausible theories in a revolving process called abduction. Value judgments on certain questions and theses, he argues, are unavoidable and even beneficial for scholarship. He positions abduction as more helpful than induction or deduction to consider a claim's validity inside knowledge production, both in everyday life as well as in scholarly activity.

10   The analytical toolkit that comprises metamodernism leads to »Revolutionary Happiness«. Under »Revolutionary Happiness«, Storm presents arguments as to why scholarship is valuable in political or activist efforts, understanding that one does not distort scholarly conclusions for political goals, epistemology is not confused with ethics, and that researchers are honest about their normative premises or political ambitions. Chapter 7 seeks to encourage disenchanted scholars, making the political argument for academia's relevance. Some readers outside the Anglo-American sphere may see Storm's message of »Revolutionary Happiness« as unfitting for a book about theory and methodology, a motivational speech rather specific to the U.S. American post-Trump context of cynical critical theory. »Revolutionary Happiness« as research's *raison de etrê* borrows significantly (in ways that possibly are tainted by essentialism) from Greek, Indian, and Confucian philosophy. Ultimately, readers who have been confronted with questions regarding the relationship between the scholar and the subject of research, students ruminating about the relationship between social justice and scholarship, those who have quit the academy, as well as those who feel desperate within it, will be comforted by Storm's presentation without feeling silenced or dismissed.

11   Storm admits to various missing pieces in the text: he refers to postmodernism inside loose, interrelated philosophical, academic, and political movements of which readers will not find a complete history; although he hints at developing these themes in future publications. Additionally, scholars and students with strong backgrounds in philosophy will recognize Storm's arguments: his idea of »process social kinds«, as well as the notion that our categories do not represent stable definitions but rather unstable reference points for concepts that require constant reinstatement, recalls Plato's Timaeus (Chapter 4). Furthermore, his concept of hylosemiotics is recognizable in Zhuangzi's »Discussion of the Equality of Things« 齊物論 (p. 91).

12   Although he claims to write for an audience who are »tired of gratuitous namedropping«, (p. 7) Storm's citations can sometimes skim the surface of available theory, especially from a non-Western standpoint. This is notable when he fails to cite a number of Indigenous or Black scholars and interlocutors who have contributed to this debate. One such author, Marisol De La Cadena, specifically her publication »Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice Across Andean Worlds«, would have offered a perspective from Andean mixed materialist and constructivist approaches that lie latent in hylosemiotics. Furthermore, Stuart Hall is also notably unmentioned. His work is particularly relevant considering his thoughts on postmodernism not as a unique rupture in this contemporary era but rather as another philosophical crisis among many, a conceptual reconfiguration located inside all disciplines, time periods, and cultural contexts (for example, in an interview with Lawrence Grossberg, »On Postmodernism and Articulation, an Interview with Stuart Hall«, 1986, where some of Storm's arguments on meaning and representation can also be located). Storm emphasizes that this project is born from the important interventions of critical decolonial, queer, and feminist scholarship, yet departs from what he calls "simplistic moralizing" in the efforts of interdisciplinarity (p. 25-26). In this sense, his project both utilizes and goes beyond the aims of critical theory.

13   Nevertheless, this book is a definite intervention to counter purported universalism in Western categories by inviting readers to consider the cultural »rest« for solutions. Rather than immediately operationalizing Storm's metamodernism, scholars using this

concept should identify its missing links as they wield his suggestions to create even better tools for understanding how certain concepts, restrictions, and norms become anchored or even oppressive in society. Although many of his arguments are not new, they are refreshingly presented in a deep, multicultural context, making them more plausible for an audience convinced of many postmodern assertions concerning truth and understanding.

14 Well-written and with sympathy for the reader, the text would be useful in a classroom setting, for graduate student reflection, and for early career scholars. It is sensitive to critique concerning race, class, gender, and privilege in academia, taking seriously the aims of such criticism all the while holding them to strict academic scrutiny. The author takes pains to address positionality, especially his own (p. 25 and p. 294, ff 57). His insights are thoroughly interdisciplinary and relevant to a wide audience. This text is especially relevant for the academic study of religion; scholarship that utilizes Storm's methodological toolkit will open space for students to study the mechanics of language and meaning, anchoring processes that create norms, and social kinds inside hegemonic discourses, especially relevant when studying religious discourses. Beyond studying different religions in different cultural contexts, Storm encourages students to pay more attention to how what we call »religion« operates and what that means more broadly for humankind.

15 Metamodernism is a daring attempt to counter ethical nihilism and epistemological paralysis troubling academic research and cultural institutions. For students, scholars, or activists versed in postmodernism or social justice seeking to consider the ethical, moral, and methodological questions raised by their projects, Storm's study offers an exciting point of departure.

AUTHOR

MIRIAM HAMBURGER

Universität Leipzig
Kontakt: miriam.hamburger@uni-leipzig.de