

# The 'Universal' in science as a Dilemma for scholarship in Africa

---

Olajide Oloyede, University of the Western Cape

## Résumé

### **L'universel dans les sciences, un dilemme pour la recherche en Afrique**

*La domination de la science occidentale dans la compréhension des réalités sociales en Afrique est largement reconnue. Les tentatives de contrebalancer cette domination perverse ont poussé les sciences sociales en particulier la sociologie, à progressivement admettre qu'il y a au moins deux domaines différents de la connaissance - scientifique et non scientifique. Ceux-ci sont généralement pris en considération pour caractériser savoir occidental et connaissances non occidentales. L'idée qu'il existe des domaines de la connaissance pose en quelque sorte le problème de la relation entre la connaissance et la pertinence pour laquelle la préoccupation est avant tout de la pertinence des connaissances acquises dans la quête de la compréhension de notre monde pour l'action sociale. Ce problème de la différenciation entre connaissance et pertinence est celui de «l'universel». Cet article soutient que tel est le dilemme pour les sciences sociales en Afrique. Il revient sur l'histoire de la pensée occidentale pour mettre en avant le caractère durable des 'outils' de compréhension que les savants de l'Afrique (Africains et Européens) utilisent pour donner un sens au contexte africain dans le cadre de ce dilemme.*

## Abstract

*The dominant of western knowledge in the understanding of the complexion of the social reality in Africa is widely acknowledged. The attempt at a corrective to this perverse dominance has seen the increasing acceptance in the social sciences, in particular sociology, that there is at least two different realms of knowledge to be gained – scientific and non-scientific both of which are generally considered to characterize western knowledge and non-western knowledge respectively and how, to a different extent, we relate ourselves to our world intimately connected to these realms. The idea that there are realms of knowledge somehow poses a problem of the relation of knowledge to relevance where the concern is primarily with the relevance of knowledge gained in the quest for understanding our world for some kind of social action. The problem of knowledge to relevance becomes the problem of the 'universal'. This paper argues that this is the dilemma for African social science. It steps a back into the history of western thought to point to the enduring nature of the 'tools' of understanding that scholars of Africa (Africans and Europeans) use to make sense of the African context as part of the dilemma.*

**T**he study and understanding of the complexities of social reality in Africa, as indeed other societies that are not western, is dominated by western knowledge or what is referred to as science. The general intellectual lands-

cape is one in which the philosophies, epistemologies, analytic categories and strategies produced in the west become the source of "universal truth". This state of affairs in the quest for the search for the elusive truth about the life world has been contested in the form of what is known as indigenous way of knowing or indigenous knowledge. The premise of the contestation is that there are two realms of knowledge to be gained: the scientific and non-scientific. Both of which are generally considered to characterize western knowledge and other knowledge respectively. It is argued that we relate ourselves to our world intimately connected with these realms. The idea that there are realms of knowledge somehow poses a problem of the relation of knowledge to relevance where the concern is primarily with the relevance of knowledge gained in the quest for understanding our world for some kind of social action. If we take the route, which displaces our focus onto one of values, which ultimately the argument is about, then the question that such a route raises, which is a familiar one, is: Are there universal values or are all values relative (to a context, to a historical moment)? The problem of knowledge to relevance, in this case, becomes the problem of the 'universal' and the 'particular': the concentration here in this paper is on the 'universal'. It is argued that the 'universal' in science, that is, the claim that the only systematic 'route' capable of providing us with the truth of things, is the dilemma for students of Africa. This would seem clear in the term 'science' in social science. Doing social science in an African context is thus epistemologically problematic and this is a dilemma for students of the African context.

The problem of universalism is by all means an issue that is hardly new for it has been widely explored throughout many centuries resulting in polarized positions. It has been visited and re-visited with such visits falling in to what has been described as the oldest branches of philosophical thinking: *ontology*, or the question of what the basic constituents of nature are; *epistemology* or the question by which tools the human mind can acquire knowledge about the external world. The visits are, in many cases, prompted by a sense of urgency to deal with issues that bear heavily on practice or everyday human experiences. For example, two issues of concern in many African countries, education and development have often raised the questions: What sort of education? What sort of development? Both questions continue to be raised by academics and policy makers in most African countries, which, in recent times, has, as indeed most countries in Asia and Latin America, seen a rapid integration into the western world resulting in what Alexander (1995:65) describes as "perhaps the most dramatic set of spatially and temporally contagious social transformations in the history of the "world", a transformation which is producing for many and "unwelcome convergence" in political organisation (ditto western democracy as the ideal socio-political organisation of human groups) and social thought.

The issue discussed in this paper continues with the kind of issues that motivated what I have been trying to do in recent times, an offshoot of which is the ideas set out in another paper (on mental illness) titled *Mental Illness in culture, Culture in mental Illness. An anthropological view from South*

*Africa*, to which there has been worthy reactions.<sup>1</sup> My thesis is elementary and obvious: intellectual paradigms are culturally mediated, that is, they are contextually situated and relative. With this widely expressed assertion, one is faced with a deeply problematic situation; how can one do 'social science' without the 'science' in the social given that the 'science' is a mode of inquiry and a body of knowledge that is 'alien' to the African cultural context but recognised as the major avenue into valid knowledge about the social world. This paper limits itself to pointing out the epistemological dilemma of doing social science in Africa. A much more ambitious contribution has come from Adesina (2003) who, using Akiwowo's work as a platform, suggest a foundation for epistemic intervention. He argues for what he refers to as *Ti-bi-t'ire* Logic, which argues for mutually inclusive and interpenetrating sources of epistemic vocation. Future discussion will go beyond what is contained in this paper, which takes the form of a dialogue in line with the more recent techniques and strategies for the exposition of philosophical ideas whose primary dimension include the unveiling of their various facets in terms of the necessity, equivalence, effectiveness and limitation of these ideas, but as Todorov (1993:52) remarked "does not consist in the juxtaposition of several voices but in their interaction".

A piece of knowledge, I do not want to take it for granted that its meaning is widely shared and as such find it of importance to make clear my understanding of it right from the beginning. One finds diverse definitions of knowledge in the literature (*somehow dealt with extensively in sociology of knowledge*). For the purpose of the present paper, I am inclined towards McCarthy's view of knowledge as "any and every set of ideas accepted by one or another society of people, ideas pertaining to what they accept as real" (McCarthy, 1996:2). As Podynowski (2003:738) suggested "knowledge understood as such do not have an inherent epistemological claims to 'truth' or the most valid representation of reality".

My discussion of the concept of universal, which follows in the next section, draws from the debate in the metaphysics of properties. The issues and questions in the debate, to me, have more general application. In other words, they are not specific to the metaphysics of properties. What I draw from it is however limited but it serves my discussion, which is brief and by no means intended to be complete. I offer it as an on-going engagement as I have earlier pointed out. My discussion also takes me into the history of thought, which can be distinguished from the history of ideas and the history (or the study) of works. The distinctive feature of thought "is that it emanates from an individual subject. The history of ideas, for its part, examines anonymous ideas by situating them not in synchronic context in which someone conceived them, but in the diachronic series composed of other formulation of the same idea. The history of works, in turn focuses on the description and interpretation of particular texts, not on the integral thought of a single author" (Todorov, 1993:xii-xiv)

<sup>1</sup> See Oloyede, O (2002) *Mental Illness in Culture* in *Mental Illness: An Anthropological View from South Africa*; Braakman, Mario, H. All sciences are equal, but some sciences are more equal than others; Oloyede revisited; Ventevogel, Peter, Everything in culture, but culture is not everything: Comments on Oloyede's paper on mental illness and culture; van Dongen, ELs, beyond the common debate on culture and psychiatry; A comment on Olajide Oloyede; Oloyede, O, A call for cultural sensitivity is not cultural relativism: Response of comments on 'Culture in Mental Illness'. All in *Medische antropologie*, Volume 14, number 2, 2002.

## The Universal through the Particular

The point of departure for universalism is that the universal is deduced in the basis of a single particular. I would like to think that this point is an accepted one, at least, to a considerable extent, a in mind the controversy surrounding the 'universal' and the 'particular'. We see two sides to the conception of universals, distinguished as the Platonic and Aristotelian, a distinction, which has been suggested as turning on whether universals have a spatio-temporal location. The former, it is noted, denies them thus making universals abstract entities; whilst the latter sees universals as having a location and as such begs the question: where are universals located? To which the answer is that they are in some way located in their instances and so are wherever their instances are. Now, as it has been suggested by those who take side in the age-long controversy about the status of universals, this leads to "some queer" features of the location of Aristotelian universals: "(i) one universal can be wholly present at different places at the same time and (ii) two universals can occupy the same place at the same time". The point is made that given that we want to satisfy the second adequacy condition even where the property is instantiated by two particulars at the same time, we must say that the universal is in both particulars at the same time. However, there is the claim that this is not how universals are in their instances; they do not have parts, which are spread around their instances. Instead, they are wholly present in their instances. So, we have to conclude that (i) is true.

We must however bear in mind that the Aristotelian universals and the Platonic conception are but two of many conceptions. Such conceptions tend to differ on their attempt to answer the questions: "What are the identity conditions of universals? What universals are there?" I can do no more here than repeat the sentences by which Aristotelian and Platonic conceptions are often expressed, without guaranteeing that their meaning will be fully clarified. Universals, in Aristotelian realism, have "no independent existence" but exist only as characters or properties of particulars. The issue, as Pap noted almost sixty years ago, is, what literal meaning can be attached to the phrase "universals have a being independent of particulars" as well as to the phrase "the being of universals depends upon the being particulars." If, he remarked, the former, the Platonic phrase, means "no universals are exemplified by particulars" and the latter, "all universal are exemplified by particulars" which is Aristotelian, then both views are false. For him, the truism is that some universals are exemplified and some are not.

In Armstrong's theory of universals, which, in fact, is Aristotelian, universals are wholly present wherever they are instantiated; their instances literally have something in common. This is to say that universals are entities capable of having instances. If we accept this, then, we can argue that western knowledge is wholly present wherever they are instantiated. such instantiation I would like to argue, is in sciences: and given that science has become at different places across time, western knowledge thus is universal. But does the fact of its 'universal' make it superior to other forms of knowledge? This would seem implied in the philosophy and claims of scientific knowledge and almost explicit in the history of western thought. There is the idea of the

existence of certain ineradicable *ontological* differences between the West and others (Africa, Asia and South America). We see this idea in the iconic European philosophers including Hegel, Condorcet, John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx and such 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers and thinkers as Bertrand Russell, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and so on (Halbfass, 1988). We see it clearly expressed in the *History of Philosophy* by Hegel, described as “one of the quintessential European thinkers” (Halbfass, 1988:84) and generally considered as “one of the most important (Western) philosophers” (Findlay, 1964:320) an unashamedly declaration of the universality of western thought.

He suggests, for example, that the *superiority* of Europe over non-Europeans follows from the fact that Europe alone is capable of Universal history and philosophy. In a paragraph that might perhaps embarrass those who subscribe to his ideas, he writes blatantly, expressing the superiority of the West and its exclusively claim to universal thought, that:

“ Africa proper, as far as History goes back, has remained – for all purposes of connection with the rest of the world – shut up; it is ... The land of childhood... Enveloped in the dark mantle of Night (1900:148)... The peculiarly African character is difficult to comprehend for the very reason that, in reference to it, we must give up the principle which naturally accompanies all our (emphasis in the original) ideas – the category of Universality... At this point, we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World (emphasis added); it has no movement or development to exhibit... What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature... Europe presents on the whole the centre and end (emphasis added) of the world” (1900:157-158)

We see also in Condorcet the philosophy of the universal: “human nature is the same everywhere, since our rational faculty constitutes part of human nature, this faculty is therefore likewise universal. only reason is capable of distinguishing what is just from what is unjust; therefore it is incumbent upon universal reason to formulate the principle of justice that are valid everywhere and for everyone” (cf. Todorov, 1993:24). Thus for Condorcet, natural law becomes rational law, while remaining just as universal as its predecessor. This point laid the foundation for Condorcet to state further that since the principles of justice are everywhere the same, laws, must be the same as well. in other words, laws must not result from natural law and from the physical, social and historical condition of a nation, as Montesquieu suggested, but must proceed from the principles of justice alone. We see in this view how reason and its finest incarnation, science, began to take hold of constructing reality beyond its ‘habitus’ as ‘particular form of knowledge’. In Saint-Simon, this view, the scientific doctrine, was given a definitive form in his quest for a universal and eternal constitution, which he saw as proceeding from the nature of things and from the rigour of syllogism.

However, it was in Saint-Simon's prodigy, Comte's *Preliminary Discourse* that we see in very clear terms, the truly universal doctrine, which is accorded the task of helping human kind to progress in the direction of a single society. It is worth noting that Comte's observations, which are hardly referred to in very many writings and reflections on the issue of universals, are as Todorov (1933:27) noted “occasionally so compelling that we are obliged to credit

Comte with prophetic clairvoyance". For example, he "uncovers several characteristics of contemporary society that are destined he believes, to spread throughout the globe: industrial life and a certain organization of labour, homogenization of aesthetic tastes, international agreement in the content and method of science, the preference for a particular political form, the democratic republic" (Ibid: 27)

Todorov notes that Comte's observations are coupled with a programme of action designed essentially to facilitate and accelerate the course of history. This programme has several phases beginning with a qualitative ripening, then a quantitative extension starting in France, the core of humanity. The temporal power will be carefully distinguished from spiritual power and the focus will be entirely on the latter. Only after the spiritual unity is established will it be possible to focus on political institutions. The most appropriate means for this universal expansion is education of the elites: this has the double advantage of being rapid and gentle. We see in the history of education in the colonies. From the other pole, we can argue that the universalism cannot be totally accomplished and perhaps, this explains the crisis of education in Africa. This is but a perhaps; for it we are to examine the relativism of Gustave Le Bon which is premised on cognition, the idea that "members of different cultures do not inhabit the same worlds; they have nothing in common", then the universalism of Comte cannot be accomplished since Le Bon "pushes the relativism of values to the point of establishing a discontinuity among the subspecies of humanity" (Todorov, 1993:55).

However, the judgement Le Bon brings to bear on the relativity of values is ambiguous, as Todorov (1993) pointed out, noting that on one hand, he can only rejoice in what strikes him as a triumph of science, and he admires that "the sense of the relative dominates contemporary thought" (Ibid. 56). But on the other hand, a civilization that no longer believes that its own values are absolute is a weakened civilization. The drama of relativism is that it represents "both a higher degree of civilization, the one to which the flourishing of reason gives us access, and a lower degree, to the extent that such form of civilization is weaker than those forms that believe in absolutes" (Todorov, 1993:56-57).

The relativism of values, cultural or historical, has become commonplace of our social world, accompanied, quite often, by assertion that we belong to different species and subspecies. Post-modernists, in a subtle but technically sophisticated way tend to make this known. However, this has not prevented the attribution of a dominant place to the universal. According to Levi-Strauss, perhaps, the most influential of ethnologists – those whose very object may be identified as cultural difference – "the outer differences conceal a basic unity" (Levi-Strauss, 1973:59). This point from Levi-Strauss, which echoes the classical spirit of Enlightenment philosophy, that there is such thing as "human nature" "constant and universal" is all the more disconcerting. But should one be disconcerted? After all, the ethnologist's ultimate goal, according to Levi-Strauss, is to reach the universal forms of the human mind. Although, the initial aim of the ethnologist was to study differences. This would seem to be *Rosseau-esque* in approach: reaching a goal by heading first in the opposite direction.

Levi-Strauss conceives of the universal inspired by Leibniz: from the observation of particular facets, one deduces general properties in such a way that each fact appears to be one combination – among various possible combinations – of these general and elementary features (Todorov, 1994:62). As Todorov (1994) rightly noticed, it is indeed Levi-Strauss's structural project: he refers to "that general inventory of societies which anthropology attempts to construct" and the observable data are then nothing more than "the equivalents of so many choices, from all the possible ones which each society seems to make" (Levi-Strauss, 1973:11). "Only the particulars" according to Todorov, "is observed, but the particular is understood only by way of detour through the general" (Ibid:62)

However, as rightly noted, in as much as Levi-Strauss 'preserves the image of the inventory of abstract properties, common to all cultures', he was prepared to jettison "universal forms of morality" (Todorov, 1993:62). Levi-Strauss writes that: "We must accept the fact that each society has made a certain choice, within the range of existing human possibilities, and that the various choices cannot be compared with each other" (Levi-Strauss, 1975:385). We are thus confronted with "the impossibility of arriving" at any moral or philosophical criteria by which to decide respective values of the choices which have led each civilization to prefer certain ways of life and thought while rejecting others" (1971:636). This is striking for we see here the general Universalist programme of Levi-Strauss giving way to 'radical ethical relativism' (Todorov, 193:63)

Todorov remarked, "The same thing is suggested by the famous comparison of cultures to moving trains: there exists no fixed point – that is, no point beyond a culture – from which we can judge others. We have the impression that a culture is *developing*, and we think we are making an objective judgement about it; in reality, all we see is that it is going in the same direction as we are. Or else, on the contrary, we think that another culture is *stagnating* that is another optical illusion, for we are in fact only designating the difference of direction between its movement and ours" (Ibid, p.63)

Levi-Strauss uses the image of moving trains to justify his ethical relativism. 'In order to demonstrate that the dimension and speed of the place of bodies are not absolute values, but functions of the observer's positions, we are reminded that, for a passenger sitting by the window of a train, the speed and length of other trains vary according to whether they move in the same direction or the opposite way. And every member of a culture is as closely linked to that culture as the imaginary passenger to its train" (Levi-Strauss 1973:340). However, Levi-Strauss cautions us from the logic of this relativist declaration: "we hope to introduce an additional exigency into our disciplines: do discover, beyond men's ideas of society, the hinges of the 'true system' (1973:67), the ultimate role of knowledge remains "the scrupulous search for truth (Levi-Strauss, 1971:642)

Here, he recedes back to the universalist horizon of his approach, which is significant in that the discourse of universality is already secured in Western society through science defined by Levi-Strauss as "structural interpretation". According to him "Only structural interpretation can account both itself and for other kinds ... it consists in making explicit a system of rela-

tionships that the other variants merely embodied" (Levi-Strauss, 1971:628). He thus feels justified, as Todorov pointed out, in defending "scientific knowledge which, however harmful it may have been, and further threatens to be, in its application is nevertheless a mode of knowledge where absolute superiority cannot be denied" (Levi-Strauss, 1971:636).

This would seem, in a way, rather perilous because Levi-Strauss dismisses other cultures but as suggested by Todorov, "affirming this superiority does not mean locking oneself up in categories derived from a particular culture while excluding the others, for the categories of science are never definitive and they can be modified through contact with categories from other cultures" (Todorov, 1993:86). We see something akin to this in the progress of science, which is but a way of constructing social reality, in that "the truths enshrined by scientific progress were not so much discovered, as they were but constructed" (Rule, 1997:52) as some sociologists of science, known as constructivist, would argue.<sup>2</sup> The constructionist argument invoked here relates to a different but almost identical problematic: "What social conditions led to the 'discovery' of these 'truths' rather than others?" as captured by Rule (1997). The question, of course, was a counter to the Mertonian view of science as progressive, authentic and bountiful, a view, which derives from the concern to chat the "social arrangements and process shaping scientific work" posing the question: "What norms and social arrangements help discovery of scientific truths proceed as rapidly as possible" (Rule, 1997:54).

We can readily identify two general views of science: Popper's and Polanyi's. Popper's idea of science, one would assume, is well known: articulate questions, theories and argument constitutes science. In Polanyi's view, science is constitutive of personal knowledge or commitment to one's views in the face of difficulties. For Popper, critical detachment is crucial, whereas, for Polanyi, it is critical attachment. Many of those who have critically engaged both viewpoints, seem to equate Polanyi's views with Thomas Kuhn whose idea of scientific revolution is replacement of incommensurable paradigms. Science consists of competing paradigms or culture each defined by their own paradigm where one culture becomes dominant; it is usually the paradigm of the younger generation. This is of course science in a revolutionary state.

Polanyi sees the theory of paradigms as best one of partial description of how scientific knowledge is created; the creation is through the use of tacit knowledge. Scientists, he argues, generate new theories by applying their tacit knowledge. The explicit or objective dimension of scientific knowledge can only be understood from the framework of a body of tacit or personal knowledge. The scientist, he argues, relies on tacit knowledge to understand theories and formulate. He/she uses the tacit knowledge to resolve difficulties, puzzles and problems. Discoveries are made by the scientists through the use of tacit knowledge as the means of extending the known to understanding the unknown.

We read in the sociology of scientific knowledge that this is a problem in that the role of the objective side of science is peripheral to scientific knowledge. However, for me, there is no problem to this. The problem is

<sup>2</sup>For those known as constructionists, "scientific truth consisted simply of what scientists agreed to be true to any specific moment". Thus, the truth established by scientific enquiry were factitious and arbitrary as Rule remarked (1997)



the supposed objectivity of scientific knowledge. Some writers have argued that science does not transcend culture; that it is an artefact of a specific culture and indeed the artefact of Western culture and such produces a language and form of thinking that constructs a reality relative to Western culture. Merchant (1980) further suggest, for example, that the mechanical framework for scientific investigation was transferred to societal understandings of, and orientations to, nature. She sees this 'conceptual framework' of a mechanical order as associated with a "framework of values based on power, fully compatible with the direction taken by commercial capitalism" (Merchant, 1980:193). In this analysis, ideas and interpretative structures from science are generalized and imbibed by political, economic and social aspirations as remarked by Pedykowski (2003). Merchant (1995) suggested that western commonsense reality is the world of classical physics, that is, 'a common' reality infiltrated by Newtonian physics and mechanistic world-views. With world-historical transformation, this mechanistic world-view, that is science, became dominant rapidly transforming society and social thought. We begin to see the particular become the universal in the history of science.

### **The history of science**

In the history of science, western thought began to be dominant. A useful illustration of this is social theory, which attempts to explain social reality. As Alexander (1995) rightly noted, social theory is both science and ideology. he uses 'modernity' illustrate this point. in 'modernity' we see the particular becoming the universal. Through the discourse of 'modernity', we see the doctrine of the universal. In the science of 'modernity', we see particulars instantiate the universal. Modernity, Alexander reminds us, citing Pocock, after all has always been a highly relativist term. "It emerged in the fifteen century when a newly Christianized Rome wished to distinguish their religiosity from two forms of barbarians, the heathens of antiquity and the unregenerate Jews. in medieval times, modernity was reinvented as a term implying cultivation and Learning, which allowed contemporary intellectuals to identify backwards with the classical learning of the Greek and Roman heathens themselves" (Alexander, 1995:66)

The look backwards entailed a rejection of the Middle Ages as dark, barbarous and rude; the self-conscious revival of antiquity discarded the medieval pre-occupation with theology. The world became depicted and explained without reference to a higher supernatural realm of meaning. As contained in Burckhardt's classic, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Christian belief was not that challenged nor was the validity of the Bible questioned. What was implicit in the educational ideal of those in the forefront of the look backwards, known as the humanists, was a radical transformation of the Christian idea of human beings. In the medieval view, men and women were incapable of attaining excellence through their own efforts because of their sinful nature. Recalling the classical Greek concept of human beings, the humanists considered the achievement of excellence through individual striving the end of education and life itself. In their thinking, individuals were capable of this goal; their duty was to pursue it as the end of life.

The emphasis on the creative powers of human beings in the humanist thinking was one of the most characteristic and influential doctrines of the Renaissance as historians tell us. We are cautioned though, that the Renaissance image of the individual and the world was the exclusive prerogative of a small, well-educated urban elite and did not reach down to include the masses. However, it was said to mark the birth of 'modernity'. In the middle of the seventeenth century, Aristotle and Ptolemy were overtaken by the work of Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo. Both Aristotle and Ptolemy of Alexandria, who produced the *Almagest* (A.D. 150), a handbook of Greek astronomy based on the theories of Aristotle (the earth, being the heaviest object, lay stationary and suspended at the centre of the universe), had their ideas integrated in to the Christian framework that distinguished between the world beyond the moon and an earthly realm. Copernicus who made calculations about the movement of heavenly bodies challenged the geocentric idea of the universe in Aristotle's theory and Ptolemy's theory. Kepler was to give a mathematical proof to this. There was a completely new philosophy of nature and a new science whose essence lay in the mathematical expression of physical laws that describe matter in motion. What was needed was a law that could explain the observed motion and Isaac Newton provided this in his *Principia Mathematica*. Here, he formulated universal mathematical laws and offered a philosophy of nature that sought to explain the essential structure of the universe: that matter is atomic in structure and is acted upon by immaterial forces placed in the universe by God.

In essence, what we had in this period was the condemnation of all vestiges of medieval culture. Resulting from this was a 'modern liberal' thought initiated by the Enlightenment. "With the Enlightenment, modernity became identified with rationality, science, forward progress, a semantically arbitrary relationship that seems to have held steady to this day" (Alexander, 1995:66). The Enlightenment thinkers sought to put in place a rational system of ethics and philosophy based on scientific truth. Newtonian science, which had viewed space as a distinct physical reality, a stationary and motionless medium through which light travelled and matter moved was extolled. For the educated classes, to know was to have the knowledge of Newtonian science. Scientific knowledge became the gold standard for all knowledge. For example the sociological thought of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, was wrapped in science: knowledge could be based upon observation, experimentation and rational deduction, it could be systematic, verifiable, progressive and useful. As one historian put it "the science of Newton became the science of Western Europe: nature mechanized, analyzed, regulated and mathematicized" (Perry, 1990). This was to be altered by Einstein's theory of relativity which hold that time differs for two people travelling at different speeds. For Einstein, the only way we can describe the motion of one body is to compare it with another moving body.

### **Final remarks**

What I have tried to do in this paper is to point out the epistemological dilemma of doing social sciences in the context of Africa. The dilemma

remains, I suggest, so long as "science" instantiates. As Adesina (2003) points out in the specific case of sociology, we need to recognize what is idiographic about western sociology. He suggests, in an ambitious contribution to resolving this dilemma that we need to make a distinction between contextual application of received wisdom and a fundamental challenge to and the displacement of received wisdom at all the levels of distinct paradigms and epistemology. He notes that the former is about what he refers to as the deployment of existing largely western paradigms and epistemologies, while the latter is about the mechanism for distinct production of knowledge. This suggestion, which I subscribe to is not about displacing one modality of knowing with another not is it the postmodernist solution of relativising experience. It is indeed not about the former precisely because as some have argued, that the coherent world-view of the Enlightenment, which had produced an attitude of security and optimism, may have been dissolved by the early twentieth century, but 'modernity' still holds sway all over. In social theory modernization, which Alexander (1995) characterized, as a symbolic system that functioned not only to explain the world in a rational way, but to interpret the world in a manner that provided 'meaning and motivation is still the dominant framework of development in the countries of the South. It functioned, Alexander points out, as "a metalanguage that instructed people how to live" (1995:69).

Because modernization is social theory and social theory is science, which is itself an explanatory effort, that is, an attempt at explaining reality, modernization was characterized by, in Alexander's words, the following ideal-typical traits:

- 1) "Societies were conceived as coherently organized systems whose subsystems were closely interdependent.
- 2) Historical development was parsed into two types of social systems, the traditional and modern, statuses which were held to determine the character of their societal subsystems in determinate ways.
- 3) The modern was defined with reference to the social organization and culture of specifically Western societies, which were typified as individualistic, democratic, capitalist, scientific, secular and stable, and as dividing work from home in gender-specific ways.
- 4) As a historical process, modernization was held to involve non-revolutionary, incremental change.
- 5) The historical evolution to modernity – modernization – was viewed as likely to succeed, thus assuring that traditional societies would be provided with the resources for what Parsons called a general process of adaptive 'upgrading', including economic take-off to industrialization, democratization via law, and secularization and science via education." (Alexander, 1995:67-68)

In as much there has been extensive critique of this model from all sorts of writers whose work are collectively called *dependency theories*, some, if not most of the "ideal-typical traits" characterizing the model are becoming a 'reality': we see evidence of this, for example, in the universalization of culture (postmodernists have written extensively about this coining the term, 'macdonalization'), the dying need and almost blinding effort to be a 'player' in the global economic market, the relentless orientation of the organization of society towards democracy. The fact of wanting to be a player in the global economic market, which countries of the South, generally referred to as the Third World, set as a goal in their 'development' effort, suggests active participation in the universalization doctrine of the West. As Alexander (1995) puts it: "we are in a new age of social thought characterized by a renewed sense of involvement in the project of universalism rather than some lipid sense of its concrete forms" (p. 101). However, it is not so much wanting to be involved because already, the particular has become universal; western knowledge is instantiated in science and science somehow envelopes contemporary thinking in form of social theory of human development. This is the real dilemma for students of the African context but the new intellectual production from the West, post-modernism, assures us that the West is no longer the centre of the world. Those welded to postmodernism point out that it represents the decentralization and decolonization of Western thought.

## References

- Adam, B., *Timescape of modernity*, Routledge, London, 1998
- Adesina, Jimi, O (2003) *Sociology and Yoruba Studies: epistemic intervention or doing sociology in the vernacular*
- Alexander, J.C., *Modern, Anti, Post and Neo*, *New Left Review*, March/April, number 210, 1995:63-104
- Condorcet, M., *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, Translated by J. Barraclough, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1955
- Halbfass, (1988)
- Hegel, F (1900, 1955)
- Kuhn, T.S., *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1970
- Le Bon, G., *The Psychology of Peoples*, G.E. Stechert, New York, 1894, 1912
- Levi-Strauss, C., *The Naked Man*, Translated by John Weightman and Doreen Weightman, Harper and Row, New York, 1981
- Levi-Strauss, C., *Structural Anthropology*, Translated by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf, Basic Books, New York, 1963
- Levi-Strauss, C., *Structural Anthropology, Vol. 2*, Translated by Monique Layton, Basic Books, New York, 1976
- Levi-Strauss, C., *Tristes Tropique*, Translated by John Weightman and Doreen Weightman, Atheneum, New York, 1974
- Merchant, C., *The death of nature*, Harper Collins, San Francisco, 1980
- Merton, R.K., *Sciences, Technology and Society in Seventh Century England*, Howard Fertig, New York, 1970
- Oliver, A., "The metaphysics of properties", *Mind*, January, 1996

- Oloyede, O., "Mental illness in culture, Culture in mental illness: An anthropological view from South Africa", *Medische Anthropology*, December, 2002
- Pap, A., *Elements of Analytic Philosophy*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1949
- Rule, J.B., *Theory and progress in Social Science*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997
- Todorov, T., *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism and Exoticism in French Thought*, Seconde printing, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1994

