

Assessment of Postmodernism

'Modernity, on all its sides, may be defined in terms of an aspiration to reveal the essential truth of the world' (Boyne and Rattansi, 1990).

'[In postmodernism] philosophical pillars are brought down, the most notable of which are the 'unities' of meaning, theory and the self' (Hassard and Parker, 1993).

In my opinion the above quotes neatly summarise the motivational ideas behind modernism and postmodernism as thought processes. However different the inspiration, methodology, and conclusions of classical sociological ideas such as those of Marx, Durkheim and Weber it can be said that their documentation of society into meta-narratives indicates an inherent desire to fully understand the modern world in which they lived (Morrison, 1995). This desire of modernists is summarised in the Boyne and Rattansi (1990) quote; postmodernists on the other hand do not seek to fully understand society with one direct answer and methodology but attempt to question what is happening in society with reflexivity and ambivalence; understanding how relativism shapes all sociological thought. Hassard and Parker (1993) illustrate this point with the imagery of strong 'philosophical pillars' being brought down to be questioned, re-examined and perhaps even destroyed with postmodern thought. Although postmodernity is not just a style of thinking it has been stated as a social condition or a 'social, political and cultural configuration' (Boyne and Rattansi, 1990); a process of development from 19th century modernity which encapsulates 'literary theory, linguistics, philosophy and social analysis' (Boyne and Rattansi, 1990). With its very nature postmodernism does not attempt to hold any great answers for social thought, at least not in the same style as modernism, however this essay is an attempt to look at how worthwhile postmodernism has been to sociology by examining how it has influenced the progression of social thought. This will begin with looking at how postmodernism has

affected the sociological stances in the modernist classics. I will also discuss what postmodernism means to feminism a more recent sociological discipline.

Marx's ideas on class oppression and political revolution stem from his dialectical view of history. He felt a change of different productive forces always resulted in two polarised conflicting groups, the owners and the workers, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. For Marx this 'made possible the economic interpretation of history in a way not seen before' (Morrison, 1995) this would determine a transition to full globalised capitalism. A development of proletariat class-consciousness would bring about a communist revolution resulting in the end of dialectical materialism. For postmodernists there are flaws in any determinist ideas; Marxism is a good example of this. In 'The Postmodern Condition' (1979) Lyotard explains

'The old principle that the acquisition of knowledge is indissociable from the training (Bildung) of minds, or even of individuals, is becoming obsolete and will become ever more so'.

For postmodernists nothing in what Marx viewed as fact was removed from his own ideas and opinions, nothing was objective. It is easy to develop a critique of Marx's work 'The Communist Manifesto' gives details of a communist revolution which has never taken place, his ideas are seen as eurocentric and patriarchal (Etzioni-Halevy, 1981). Neomarxists aim is to salvage what is relevant in Marxism by highlighting evidence of class oppression and acknowledging gender discrimination. Neo-Marxism is an attempt to move away from the meta-narrative of dialectical materialism whilst retaining the ultimate goal of Marxism which is ending class oppression (Heywood, 2001).

However, postmodernism takes the criticism in a different direction. Lyotard (1979) goes as far as saying 'Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold... Knowledge

ceases to be an end in itself, it loses its "use-value". For Lyotard scientists and sociologists have an agenda even if it is subconscious, everything is relative to them. Norris (1990) illustrates the extremity of Baudrillard's criticism of Marxism in 'The Mirror of Production' (1973) he explains how Baudrillard viewed Marx's investment in concepts (in which Marx placed universal value) as in fact betraying 'its own critical imperative, (which is) the will to demystify naturalised, commonsense modes of perception by showing them to rest on stipulative values derived from some particular class-interest'. For postmodernists it is no longer possible to fall back on meta-narratives and for some it is impossible to even distinguish truth.

Although I have given Marx as an example of postmodernism contesting the classics I feel Durkheim and Weber present similar problems. Even Durkheim's attempt to 'establish the existence of social facts independent of abstract philosophical speculation' (Morrison, 1995) through collecting data becomes meaningless in an extreme postmodernist argument. Durkheim, influenced by Positivism, held the idea that society could be viewed entirely scientifically by abandoning the search for 'abstract truths in favour of a search for law-like regularities' (Morrison, 1995). He did this by collecting a large amount of information for his studies most notably for his work 'Suicide' (1897) an attempt to form a social theory based on the rates and causes of suicide within society. Denning (2004) explains Lyotard's critique of science by describing how the narratives produced by scientists are always controlled by 'protocols'.

'In practice, a theorist or researcher is not faced with infinite possibilities to explore, and can only play within the limits of a system of permissible moves.' This gives scientific knowledge incredulity just like Marx's historical viewpoint. Both are restricted by 'terminology which only makes sense within its own boundaries' (Denning, 2004) and both are therefore subjected to 'the power structure' of that discipline.

The postmodernist rejection of the classics can be seen as justified through the need for reflexivity and pluralism in every sociological debate. Burman (1992) states that

‘Fragmentation, uncertainty and difference are held to govern our worldview, reflected by a culture intent on style, pleasure and consumption.’

This illustration of postmodernist society may depict for many a more realistic image of society’s progression than Marx, Weber and Durkheim managed. This is due to postmodernism presenting ambivalence instead of answers using pluralism which allows ‘for general theories to be held, but not held absolutely true, so that openness can be maintained’ (Doherty et al, 1992). This openness is not only beneficial but essential as it allows for infinite relativist arguments to develop Doherty et al, 1992 sums this up with ‘for some social scientists the simultaneous acceptance of multiple and conflicting readings appears to cause no difficulties’. Certainly caution in accepting one answer in social thought is important and probably the most notable strength of postmodernism. However, this poses difficulty for those who believe social thought should be more than theories, wishing it to positively benefit society even if it is indirectly.

Postmodernism’s ambivalence poses a problem in looking at the very real problems within society. Feminism is born out of reflexive views of patriarchal sociology; it questions the sexist tradition of the classics and accepts relativism. Some feminists have also developed a critique of scientific methodology, calling for more qualitative methods (Bilton et al 2002). In my opinion feminist sociology presents itself as being beyond the modernist classics, standing with neomarxism in what some theorists have defined as the present transitional period heading towards postmodernism (Boyne and Rattansi, 1990).

Mills (1993) explains that Postmodernist analysis provides ‘several clues as to the generation of sexism’ but at the same time discourages the potential for developing strategies

for change. Mills gives an example of patriarchal institutions, explaining that the idea of positive discrimination used to promote women is unsuccessful as ‘organizations are not simply spaces into which people enter, but rather, networks or relationships which are deeply gendered’. Postmodernism certainly recognises flaws in society but its pluralism forces it to remain ambivalent. ‘The organization of everything may have a disproportionate impact on how we view ourselves and the world’ (Mills, 1993) this means that different people inevitably lead different lives. For feminists this is an unacceptable conclusion as gender discrimination and oppression is very real and should be highlighted with a substantive campaign to end the inequality felt by many. In order to satisfy the feminist argument Mills suggests the way forward could be ‘the development of a feminist discourse’ which remains ‘sceptical to alternative truth claims’. This would mean the avoidance of creating paradigms and schemes whilst setting the agenda of exposing thinking and practices that contribute to the oppression of women.

It is unclear whether a full postmodern society would have gender divisions as the picture painted by strong postmodernists is quite blurred. Baudrillard's age of ‘hyperreality’ in which truth is in a state of constant flux being dictated by ‘the latest media consensus’ (Boyne and Rattansi, 1990) is hard to envisage. Whilst advocates of Baudrillard would cite truth as a ‘use-value’ with nothing more than symbolic value. This leaves out any ethical debate as ‘meaning is no longer secured, subjectivity is fragmented and contradictory’ (Doherty et al, 1992). Although a weaker postmodern debate details a postindustrial service based economy and gives greater clues to the ethics of a postmodern society (Boyne and Rattansi, 1990). Society has clearly altered since the classical sociologists wrote their grand theories and postmodernists have clear inspiration in the new technologies, arts and language styles which make up present society. I still find Baudrillard's idea of ‘hyperreality’ too abstract and disorientating to provide a realistic picture of where society and social thought are heading.

However, postmodernism always allows for an alternate suggestion which gives room for less aggressive theories. With this in mind postmodernism does provide many valuable questions and ascertions.

Hassard and Parker (1993) describe postmodernism as 'the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies' they do not ascertain whether postmodernism as the condition of society has been reached or if indeed it will be. For me postmodernism is not a desirable 'condition of knowledge', I feel it delves too much into the process of dissecting ideas which distracts from any understanding of society one might be able to obtain. Although as I have highlighted in this essay the importance of reflexivity, which postmodernism promotes I feel if social thought is continue to develop after postmodernist ideas it is vital that some truths can be established. Although Lyotards 'search for instabilities' (1979) is captivating it creates 'a universe of nihilism where concepts float in a void'. Doherty describes the lack of links between postmodernism and social concerns as being negative citing its 'obtuse quality' means it is left not unethical but entirely without ethics by 'denying the validity of the existence of universal values and ethics to which all political positions lay claim'. Although postmodernism has been worthwhile in its promotion of much needed questions in social thought I find feminism and neomarxism more useful as they combine reflexivity with ethical ideas. I believe most neomarxists and feminists would agree that their sociological viewpoints were partly created from their own subjective knowledge yet would claim subjective knowledge can still contain many very real truths.