

### **ABSTRACT**

Postmodernism refers to (1) postmodern social conditions, i.e. postmodernity, and (2) an allegedly new theory for understanding society. As the latter, postmodernism is essentially a critique and a rejection of the scientific paradigm which has come to dominate the Western world after the Enlightenment. Because of this, feminist theory is one of the most vigorous manifestations of postmodernist thought at this time. This paper attempts to show that the postmodern analysis is merely an extension of important elements of classical social theory. For example, linguistic determinism, epistemological relativism, cultural criticism and left-liberal bias in favor of underdogs are characteristics of Symbolic Interactionism and of other types of interpretive/humanistic sociology, if not -- to some extent -- of Sociology itself.

### **POSTMODERNISM: OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLES?**

This paper evolves out of a graduate seminar in Social Psychology I taught in the spring of 1996. The class forced me to become somewhat acquainted with a popular and controversial intellectual movement of the 1990s -- Deconstructionism/Postmodernism.

As the title of the paper suggests, my overarching purpose is to note continuities between postmodernism and a number of antecedents in Sociology. I shall conclude that postmodernism is to some extent a fad which is busy reinventing the wheel, or rather core tendencies in classical Sociology. In many instances, it is inventing a new vocabulary for old theoretical insights. At times, it carries those insights to their extreme and, in some cases, absurd logical conclusions. My remarks are organized under the following five questions: (1) What is postmodernity? (2) What is postmodernism? (3) What is new about postmodernism? (4) What is the significance of the new rhetoric? and (5) What are the postmodernists's values?

#### **What is Postmodernity?**

I will not attempt to provide a final definition of postmodernism -- a trend which has been described, criticized and debated in an immense number of publications. Postmodernism is only one label used. Generally associated with it are the concepts of Deconstructionism and Poststructuralism. Related as well is the category of Cultural Studies (see for example Denzin, 1992). Finally there is Feminist Theory, another body of work strongly associated with this tradition. While these terms are not synonymous, I will alternate between their usage, depending on the context of my remarks.

*The most distinctive features of postmodernity are cultural rather than structural or economic: The mass mediated electronic culture blurs the distinction between reality and unreality, between the important and the frivolous, between truth and falsehood, between medium and message. Reality and fantasy merge -- as in cybersex, virtual reality, the O.J.Simpson trial and Disneyworld.*

First, does postmodernism refer to (1) an emerging social reality or (2) a new theoretical school/perspective? The answer is: both. As Van den Berg notes in his critique of postmodernism, one meaning of the term is "the thesis that there are social transformations going on out there that render the "modernist" conceptual apparatus developed by the classical sociological tradition obsolete," and a second meaning is "the whole collection of philosophical criticisms of Enlightenment thought and its heirs, and particularly of its allegedly oppressive epistemological foundations." (Van den Berg, 1996). I shall call the first of these two meanings postmodernity and the second one postmodernism.

As a new world out there, a new set of social conditions, it may be that postmodern society is qualitatively different from what preceded it. The postmodernity hypothesis is that our society has taken a quantum leap into a new historical stage.

Modern society is about work and production; postmodern society is about leisure, consumption and human relationships. Modern society is colonialist and capitalist; postmodern society is postcolonialist and postcapitalist. Modern society communicates through printed words; postmodern society communicates electronically and iconically, as Marshall McLuhan saw long ago (see McLuhan, 1965), becoming a videocy (Denzin, 1992:79).

The most distinctive features of postmodernity are cultural and psychological rather than structural and economic: The electronic mass culture blurs the distinction between reality and unreality, between the important and the frivolous, between truth and falsehood, between medium and message (McLuhan, 1965). Reality and fantasy merge -- as in cybersex, virtual reality, the O.J. Simpson trials and Disneyworld. According to Baudrillard (1983:11), the sign has become reality, or the hyperreal. And in America, at least, life now imitates art (i.e., television and movies) rather than vice versa. For example, police officers model their behavior after T.V. shows like Cops.

Modern civilization is based on the Enlightenment: Cartesian rationalism, empiricism, a belief in social progress through science and technology, a belief in objectivity, and liberal democracy. Postmodernism replaces these with a relativistic epistemology. Indeed, postmodernism asks only epistemological questions, altogether excluding ontological ones. Postmodernism claims to be value neutral and culturally relativistic. Only definitions matter, since they are reality.

This description of postmodern society is a hypothesis, or a construct. The hypothesis is that Western culture is, at the turn of the millennium, qualitatively different from what it was during earlier. This can be tested through "modern" methodologies, namely those of positivist social research.

Such research would be quite useful, in view of the large amount of anxiety at large regarding the postmodern conditions which are allegedly engulfing us and said to produce cultural and moral decline. Many people feel that they live in an increasingly rudderless world, a disintegrating culture, a world in which old-fashioned certainties have disappeared and been replaced by nihilism and relativism.

### **What is Postmodernism?**

Secondly, What is postmodernism as a new social theory? Is it a coherent theory? Absolutely not. Is it a perspective? Yes. Is it an intellectual movement? Yes.

*Philosophical postmodernism is a critique of Enlightenment thought, i.e. western rationality. A claim that such an epistemology contains an arbitrary Eurocentric and masculinist bias. A claim that modern western society practices various forms of oppression and domination which are thus rooted in our language and in our classifications. An agenda aimed at deconstructing these textual narratives and at recognizing the equality of the "other."*

Philosophical postmodernism is a tendency to describe and to understand the emerging world as I have suggested in the previous paragraphs. As a theory, postmodernism and deconstructionism promote a new worldview which considers modern ways of thinking passe.

A definition of philosophical postmodernism can be given along the line started by Van den Berg a moment ago: A critique of Enlightenment thought, i.e., Western rationality. A claim that such an epistemology contains an arbitrary Eurocentric and masculinist bias. A claim that modern Western society practices various forms of oppression and domination which are rooted and concealed in our language, in our rationality and in our classifications. An agenda aimed at deconstructing these textual narratives and at recognizing the equality of the "other."

In his History of Sexuality, Foucault argues, brilliantly, that "the success (of power) is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms." (Foucault, 1976: 86). Modern forms of social control like psychiatry exemplify such power -- seemingly benign, but ultimately more insidious and more effective than old-fashioned forms of bodily punishment. Postmodernists claim to unmask these new forms of oppression.

Denzin helps us define poststructuralism as follows: It is "the theoretical position which asks how the human subject is constructed in and through the structures of language and ideology" (Denzin, 1992:32). That

author also suggests that cultural studies are the attempt "to deconstruct ... the ideological meanings that are coded into the taken-for-granted" culture surrounding us. These definitions show the clear interrelatedness of postmodernism, poststructuralism, cultural studies, and deconstructionism.

There is a heavy French element in the roots of the postmodern critique, roots going back to the middle of the 20th century. A cursory list of the French founders must include Jean Baudrillard (1983, 1987/8, 1988, 1993), Pierre Bourdieu (1984), Simone de Beauvoir (1973), Jacques Derrida (1973, 1976, 1978), Michel Foucault (1965, 1972, 1976, 1978, 1980), Jacques Lacan (1978, 1982), Claude Levi-Strauss (1969) and Jean Lyotard (1979-84). This list of French sources includes both postmodern deconstructionists and others who merely inspired them.

Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault are the two major figures in this group. While Derrida's work consists largely of the linguistic deconstruction of other scholars' texts, Foucault examines and critiques historical institutional arrangements.

In La Voix et le Phenomene, Derrida attempts to deconstruct the work of Edmund Husserl, the founder of Phenomenology. Derrida uses the word deconstruction as a translation of the German Abbau (= unbuilding) used earlier by Heidegger (see Evans, 1991: XIX). Thus Derrida's work builds upon Heidegger's, who already equated deconstruction with the destruction (Destruktion) of the history of ontology. However, unlike Heidegger, Derrida's premise is that "there (is) no center..., that the center has no natural cite...that everything (is) discourse...that (there is no) transcendental signified," but merely endless signification (Derrida, 1978:280).

Derrida's attack is not only upon Husserl, but against the entire Logocentrism of Western metaphysics going back to Aristotle. Derrida defines logocentrism as "the metaphysics of phonetic writing" (Derrida, 1976:11/3) and he blames it for the debasement of full speech. According to Evans, Derrida's attack on Husserl fails because his methods, logic, rigor and lucidity are as shoddy as those of his targets (Evans, 1991: 168).

Whether one approves of Derrida's methodology or not, his work is considered to be a major milestone in the history of deconstructionism. As such, it is a philosophical and deductive opus aiming to produce a new theory of language.

There is, however, already a hint of Sociology in Derrida's "revolutionizing" tendency. At the conceptual level, Derrida advocates a reversal (Umdrehung) of terms: "Deconstruction proceeds first by a reversal of the opposition, giving priority to the supposedly secondary term." (Evans, 1991: 52). This operation reverses the traditional Husserlian hierarchy which finds insight and meaning only in expression (bedeuten), never in mere indication (anzeichen).

Foucault's work is more empirical, inductive, and concerned with concrete social situations -- although he, too, has been faulted for flaunting scientific rigor and discipline.

According to McNay (1994:36), the difference between Derrida's deconstructionism (of Descartes' work, for example) and Foucault's is this: Derrida attacks the text from within, exposing its inner logic. Foucault on the other hand fills in the socio-historical power network within which the text is embedded.

*In Foucault's view, the error of post-Enlightenment society has been to "naturalize" Cartesian thought, i.e. to assume its universal, essential and transcendental validity. In fact, this is merely a hegemonic favorization of the more highly valorized thought of white, European, upper-middle class men over alternative perspectives and experiences. Difference, then, is construed as otherness; femininity as irrationality; skin color as inferiority.*

Whether viewed as a poststructuralist (as by Denzin, 1992:20, 22) or a postmodernist, Foucault's lifelong preoccupation was with the relationship between power and knowledge and with the "dark side of modernity" (McNay, 1994:2). In Foucault's perspective, rather than freeing the individual, the ultimate outcome of post-Enlightenment modernity has been to gradually ensnarl us in new forms of bondage. Prime examples of modern institutions which do just that are medical, psychiatric and penal institutions (la clinique, le regard medical, la surveillance et la punition, etc.).

Foucault rejects the Enlightenment's claim to universality. Instead, he seeks to recognize "the other." In his early work on madness (Folie et deraison: histoire de la folie a l'age classique), "the other" is the mental

patient. Foucault explains that in modern society madness is "otherness." It is the opposite of the Greek logos (McNay, 1994: 33).

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This oppressive thought system "normalizes" the favored group's behavior, e.g. heterosexuality. It declares it to be natural, i.e. rooted in human nature. Following Foucault, feminists now view rationality as a masculinist construct (McNay, 1994:37).

The Enlightenment introduced modern forms of power and control deemed more civilized. Deviants were no longer tortured and executed in the market square. Instead, the function of prisons became oversight (surveillance) (as well as punishment). Control occurs through normalization and practices such as psychoanalysis, which Foucault perceptively identifies as the modern secular equivalent of the confessional.

Foucault's work covers many additional topics, always focusing on power: Sexuality, governmentality, the emergence of the self, among others. His work on sexuality has been a major source of inspiration to feminist theorists, because it posits an "anti-essentialist" conception of the sexual body. A relevant work in this context is Herculine Barbin, the memoirs of a 19th century hermaphrodite, edited and with commentary by Foucault (1978).

Thus, in addition to power, the other pervasive theme in Foucault's work is the deconstruction of the essential human subject (McNay, 1994: 102-3, 164). The "subject is dead," writes Foucault. The notion of an inner core subject is a myth, a social construction.

Postmodern Feminism embraces the logic of Foucault's analysis with utter consistency. In Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, Judith Butler (1990) posits that sex as a binary concept is an artificial construct -- again the fault of Enlightenment thinking. The attack on binary sex and gender classification is by now fairly widespread. It is inspired by Foucault, who was the first to indict that schema as incorrectly "essentialist" and "foundationalist." Or, as sociologists would say, the conceptual categories of "male" and "female" are not rooted in nature, but they have been reified as if they were.

Feminist theory questions and seeks to alter the existing epistemic regime because the binary sexual classification of all people implicitly or explicitly views the male as the subject and the female as other (Butler, 1990: IX). Gender is not inherent in the nature of reality, but it is in fact "constituted through discursively constrained performative acts." And the gender identity categories "male" and "female" may be the "effects of institutions and (social) practices" rather than their "origin and cause" (Butler, 1990: XI-XII).

*The more interesting (and from a traditional "modern" perspective more bizarre) insight of postmodern feminist theory is the deconstruction of gender itself. Not only is the naturalness of binary gender (a psychological concept) brought into question, but so is that of biological sexual classification.*

According to feminist theory, then, "compulsory heterosexuality and phallogocentrism are understood as regimes of power..." (ibid). Language as we know it is phallogocentric (op. cit.: 1).

Foucault's influence is palpable in all the above quotations. It is also Foucault who noted that "juridical systems of power produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent" (Butler, 1990: 2). This excellent insight is then embraced by feminists, who argue that it is futile for "women" to appeal for emancipation to a political system which first had to constitute them (discursively and conceptually) as a subject, i.e. an object of manipulation and control.

Butler arrives at a post-feminist critique of feminism itself, in the sense that she questions the very notion of "women as the subject of feminism" (Butler, 1990: 2-3). In her analysis, even gender identity politics become problematic.

True, historically women have been relegated as to inferior status. Levi-Strauss has documented the purposes of the incest taboo and of patriarchy. The exchange of women served economic and kinship functions. The incest taboo signified compulsory exogamy (Butler, 1990: 35). Other familiar complaints state that in western culture the mind and the cultural are associated with masculinity, and the body and the natural with

femininity (Butler, 1990: 12, 35). Men and the culture at large are accused of misogyny, phallocentrism and sexism (Butler, 1990, *passim*). All of this is by now "foundational" -- to turn a favorite feminist phrase on feminists.

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Consider this illustration: The Department of Motor Vehicles stamps "Male" or "Female" on every driver's license. According to Foucault and postmodern feminism, this makes no more sense than if DMV classified the entire population into brown-eyed vs. blue/green eyed people, all the while ignoring sex.

According to this perspective, even the women's movement has been guilty of totalizing (Butler, 1990: 12), for instance when it posits universal patriarchy. If even sex and the body are cultural constructions, then perhaps the unity of all women should be questioned. The quest for alternative and pluralistic conceptualizations of identity lead postmodern feminists to demand the abolition of compulsory heterosexuality. The recognition of lesbianism as an identity is therefore an important conceptual and political objective. Some feminists (e.g. Monique Wittig) argue for a strategy that calls for the lesbianization of the whole world (see Butler, 1990:120).

### What is new about Postmodernism?

According to Docker (see Gottlieb, 1996), Baudrillard and Lyotard view the postmodern condition as just another millenarianism -- as we approach the year 2,000. It is tempting to take this one step further and to see postmodernists themselves as a cult awaiting the end of the world as we know it, and the destruction of all but the few true believers.

The list of postmodernism's precursors is long and it includes some of the central figures of classical Sociology. For example David Lyon (see Gordon, 1996: 18) shows "how nineteenth- and twentieth-century social theorists, such as Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim, prefigured some of what we now call the postmodern."

No doubt Marx's relevance lies in his contribution to a relativistic epistemology. As the first, perhaps, to assert that knowledge is socially based, Marx laid the foundation of the subdiscipline of the Sociology of Knowledge. We should therefore also include in our list such seminal works as Karl Mannheim's Ideology and Utopia (1936), and Berger and Luckmann's The Social Construction of Reality (1967).

*In contrast to the "metaphysics of substance," postmodernists maintain that the 'doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed -- the deed is everything. Fine. This is precisely the behavioristic way in which sociology, especially role theory, has always defined its subject matter.*

One of the earliest occurrences of the very word "postmodernism" is found in C. Wright Mills' The Sociological Imagination (1959: 166), where the author alludes to the coming of postmodern culture and the postmodern person, who would be increasingly subject to new forms of moral drift and alienation.

A cornerstone of the postmodern perspective is relativism -- cultural and otherwise. Following Foucault, postmodernists insistently remind us of the errors of "essentialism," "normalization," "naturalization," etc. These are all new synonyms for what used to be called reification. That is, human behavior is learned and enacted, and we should neither attribute it to an immutable human nature ("naturalization"), nor posit the existence of an essence within the self ("essentialism"). Furthermore, we should not arbitrarily call one behavior (e.g. heterosexuality) normal ("normalization") and another (homosexuality) deviant.

Butler (1990:25) quotes Nietzsche to point out " that there is no 'being' behind doing...the 'doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed - the deed is everything." This is in contrast to the traditional (presumably mistaken) "metaphysics of substance." Fine. This is precisely the way in which our discipline's subject matter is defined in every introductory textbook: behavioristically, and in terms of roles. While this is most pronounced in Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach (see for example Goffman, 1959), it is basic to all of Sociology. Similarly,

cultural relativity and value neutrality are among the first things taught in introductory Sociology classes. Thus, postmodern terms may be new, but the ideas are not.

What about "the dark side of modernity"? Postmodernists criticize the dehumanization and the subtle forms of (cultural) bondage that characterize post-Enlightenment society. However, criticizing the "technocracy" has long been a popular pastime. Well known gurus of the 1960s included Herbert Marcuse (1964) and Theodore Roszak (1969, 1973). (See also Kando, 1980). Call it Romanticism or Libertarianism -- the reaction against modernity is not new.

As to Cultural Studies, a field now dominated by deconstructionists, it is as old as Sociology itself. Denzin (1992) does an excellent job of tying Cultural Studies to postmodernist theory. However, the proposal to study cultural artifacts "anthropologically", i.e. in a verstehende fashion rather than through quantitative scientific methods, i.e. through biased, post-Enlightenment, Eurocentric, white, middle-class glasses is not new. The study of popular culture in its own right has a long history (see Kando, 1980).

Another major new departure, we are told, is the focus on identity politics, in contrast to traditional class politics (Van den Berg, 1996: 19). There are, again, two claims here: (1): That social movements are now different, i.e. that the world has changed; and (2): that we have a new social theory, i.e. that postmodernist theory opens our eyes to the new reality.

As to the first claim, yes: it appears that social movements are now more cultural and less purely economic than in the past. Feminists, gays, ethnic groups, environmentalists, religious fundamentalists, pro-lifers, pro-choicers, and the like, pursue cultural values and psychological goals rather than purely economic ones, as did the working class under old-fashioned socialism. More groups complain now about social-psychological marginalization -- which can be expected in advanced affluent societies. This tendency was already noticeable during the 1960s, when the New Left, in contrast to the Old Left, advocated a cultural revolution.

But what about the second claim? Surely postmodernism did not discover the importance of culture and values as motivating forces? Sociology has never been totally materialistic.

Another area in which postmodernism's originality must be questioned is its approach to mental illness. For example, much of Foucault's early work is devoted to this. The Frenchman argues that the post-Enlightenment rationalist treatment of madness is a form of oppression (Foucault, 1965). In Folie et Deraison: Histoire de la Folie a l'Age Classique (1961), Foucault points out that after the Renaissance, the mad comes to replace the leper as the greatest threat to the social order. The author's general focus is on the societal and cultural response to madness. His central point is that "madness is not a self-evident behavioral or biological fact, but the product of sociocultural practices" (McNay, 1994: 18).

These arguments are familiar to all sociologists, and very similar to those of Thomas Szasz (see for example The Myth of Mental Illness, 1961), whose work is a life-long crusade against conventional psychiatry and the medicalization of mental illness. Both Szasz and Foucault recognize that mental illness is no illness at all, but the reflection of power relationships, and that it is a cultural rather than a biological phenomenon. Yet there is no mutual recognition in the two authors' work, like two ships passing each other in the night.

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The same can be said about the convergence between Foucault's writings and The Social Construction of Reality, the seminal work in the Sociology of Knowledge by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1967). In the History of Sexuality (1976), Foucault discusses the role of confession, and he "regards psychoanalysis as the paradigm of the secularized, modern confessional." Accordingly, "the disclosure of one's inner self and desires imbricates the subject further in a network of disciplinary power relations" (McNay, 1994: 97). Elsewhere, Foucault explains "the complex and subtle nature of modern methods of social control: government without direct intervention (and) through an array of ostensibly beneficent pastoral strategies..." (McNay, 1994: 166-7).

This is an excellent analysis, but it parallels Berger and Luckmann's discussion of Symbolic Universe maintenance: "...Therapy in one form or another is a global social phenomenon. Its specific institutional

arrangements, from exorcism to psychoanalysis, from pastoral care to personnel counseling...belong...under the category of social control." (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 113). Yet, again, these authors pass each other without any mutual acknowledgement.

But the greatest similarity to a postmodern perspective is found in Symbolic Interactionism and its relative, Ethnomethodology.

I take Symbolic Interactionism to mean the emergent, interpretive, constructionist and non-deterministic social psychology inspired originally by George Herbert Mead (1934). Ethnomethodology is an offshoot which examines the methods used by people to construct social reality (see Garfinkel, 1967).

Norman Denzin is a sociologist who has devoted his career to updating Symbolic Interactionism and, some might say, to "saving" it whenever the perspective is in danger of succumbing to attack or to obsolescence. In this effort, Denzin keeps building bridges between Symbolic Interactionism and other perspectives which he views as being akin. Thus in 1969 the author demonstrated the compatibility between S.I. and Ethnomethodology (Denzin, 1969). In essence, Denzin pointed out, both perspectives share a constructionist conception of social reality.

More recently, Denzin (1992:49-57) reviewed the attack upon SI by the positivist establishment in American Sociology, led by Joan Huber (1973; 1974). Here, the main issue is, as usual, the fact that SI does not accept a realist, i.e. a scientific, epistemology. It rejects the assumption that Sociology studies an objective reality as do the natural sciences. Thus SI and Ethnomethodology (also called emergent theory, Interpretive Sociology and assorted other names) are rejected by the positivist establishment within American Sociology. By the same token, then, they cannot be located anywhere but on the postmodernist side of the divide.

The postmodernist literature reiterates many other arguments long familiar to Symbolic Interactionists. One is the well-known critique that language structures reality by imposing its categories upon it, thereafter leading to the reification of these constructs. As we saw in the preceding section, this is a recurring refrain in feminist theory (e.g. Butler, 1990: 20-21 a.f.), as it pertains to sex and gender classifications. When feminists write that "the category of women is a variable cultural accomplishment," this is an entirely ethnomethodological statement. When they quote Simone de Beauvoir that "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one," (Butler, 1990: 111), when they reiterate that sex and gender are social constructs or social productions, they are restating a basic premise of Symbolic Interactionism.

Feminists also note the distinction between anatomical sex (biology), gender identity (psychology) and gender performance or roles (sociology) (see Butler, 1990: 137). They question the finality of these distinctions. They note that sex can be defined in many different ways, including anatomically, chromosomally, hormonally, psychologically, socially, etc. Again, these discussions have been conducted for a long time by others, e.g. by Green and Money (1969) and myself (Kando, 1972; 1973).

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Another element postmodernists have picked up from emergent/ interpretive paradigms like Symbolic Interactionism is the tendency to be concrete, micro and ethnographic rather than abstract, global and reifying. Don't generalize, don't stereotype; do justice to the "native" point of view. Don't impose Western scientific concepts and methods on the "others." Try to understand them in their own terms. These admonitions are shared by both schools of thought.

Finally, there is no stronger connection between postmodernist theory and Meadian Social Psychology than their conception of the human self: Foucault and feminist theorists deconstruct the subject, announcing its death (McNay, 1994: 167). "The subject has no density beyond that of an empty space or point of convergence for the various relations of force" (McNay, 1994: 165).

Postmodernists believe that the subject as a source of meaning is an illusion and that meaning is the product of discourse (McNay, 1994: 11). This is very reminiscent of George Herbert Mead's pragmatist conception of meaning. The Meadian theorem is that meaning does not inhere in things, but that things are imbued with meaning through the social, discursive, interpretive process.

And the similarity between the two philosophers' conception of the self goes further: Both Foucault and Mead view the self as socially constructed as well as self-determined (McNay, 1994: 167). In sum, both recognize the possibility of freedom.

### A New Vocabulary

We have seen the many continuities between postmodernism and a variety of other sociological work. Now, let me briefly go over some of the postmodern linguistic packaging. Using a few examples, I shall deconstruct the deconstructionists, or translate their terms into ones that will often prove to be familiar.

My list of examples begins, of course, with the word deconstruction. This is sometimes used synonymously with "denaturalizing." While I do not suggest that this term is devoid of new meaning, it is related to such conventional words as "analysis" and "explication."

Next comes a long list of synonyms, including naturalizing (e.g. McNay, 1994:5), essentializing or essentialism (see Butler, 1990: 30, 141, etc.), normalizing (McNay, 1994: 6-9), universalizing (McNay, 1994:4), globalizing, totalizing (Butler, 1990: 14), fundamentalism and foundationalism (Butler, 1990: 147). All these words refer to what social theorists have long recognized as the error of reification, i.e. attributing to a mere label the causative force and the importance of an unalterable fact of natural reality. A case in point is gender, i.e. the labels "male" and "female" which, according to feminist theory, are not at all essential.

A related accusation is hegemony or hegemonic thinking (e.g. McNay, 1994:5). Western knowledge is structured by Cartesian scientific concepts and taxonomies. For example dualisms such as mind-body, subject-object, male-female, reason-emotion, nature-nurture, heterosexual-homosexual, dominance-submission (Alway, 1995). This schema has been imposed on the world, as if it represents an objective reality and an absolute truth. That is hegemonic thinking, i.e. cultural imperialism.

Similarly, postmodernists see classical literature and social theory as narratives, texts to be deconstructed (see Denzin, 1992: 86 et. passim). These are sometimes called ideological narratives, sometimes grand narratives. Robert Merton, on the other hand, called theories such as those of Durkheim, Marx and Weber grand theories.

Since the imposition of Cartesian rationalism on the world stems from the allegedly patriarchal nature of Western culture and from the hegemony of the rational mind, a favorite word signifying both of these forms of domination is phallogocentrism (e.g. Butler, 1990:12-13 et passim). This means, then, the imperialism of (1) the phallus and of (2) the logos.

There is no more important concept in the feminist-deconstructionist lexicon than the word other and such relatives as otherness and alterity (see McNay, 1994: 37 a.f.). In this literature, the other refers to ethnic minorities, gays, the mentally ill, the Third World and of course women. In sum, anyone perceived to be peripheral to the white-male-Eurocentric-rationalist hegemonic center.

In standard social psychology and role theory, the other referred to one's interlocutor. That is, ever since George Herbert Mead, interaction has been understood to presuppose taking the role of the other, i.e. understanding the interaction from his or her point of view as well as from one's own. But postmodernists are teaching their students that the other is a derogatory category of people deemed inferior. This causes considerable cacophony on college campuses.

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Related to the other is the word difference, sometimes spelled differance. As used by Derrida initially (see Evans, 1991:175-6), this is a linguistic concept used in the deconstruction of texts. However, feminist theorists (e.g. Butler, 1990: 40) apply this to an analysis of the phallogocentric economy and social structure, i.e. to the difference between men and women, oppressor and oppressed.

If Western culture is hegemonic in the ways just described, then identity politics of the other must become the counter-hegemonic or contestatory ("contestataire") counterforce, as Foucault sees it (see McNay, 1994:39, 167).



A final term to be mentioned here is the moment. Postmodernist writers often speak of a new cultural moment (e.g. Denzin, 1992:58; McNay, 1994: 6-9), an ethical moment (McNay, 1994: 154-167), an epiphanic moment (Denzin, 1992: 83 a.f.), a postmodern moment (Nunes, 1995: 319) etc. This is an important historical, biographical or social turning point, a major instance of social change.

I have reviewed some of the postmodern vocabulary: (1) deconstruction, (2) various words denoting aspects of reification, for example naturalization, (3) hegemony, (4) narrative, (5) phallogocentrism, (6) the other and difference, (7) the counter-hegemonic contest and (8) the moment. My argument is that there is much less here than meets the eye: Practically everything here can be described in terms of classical conflict theory plus some other elements of classical Sociology. domination and opposition, dialectical struggle, the testing and refutation of dominant theories, a concern for the wretched of the earth, etc. These have all been elements of Sociology for a very long time.

### **Do Postmodernists like Postmodernity?**

The purpose of this final section is to describe two aspects of postmodernism: (1)the contradiction between its avowed relativistic agenda on the one hand and its absolutist truth claims and value assumptions on the other. (2) Some of the specific values of postmodernists.

As an intellectual project, postmodernism turns the table on Western scientific rationalist thought and on Western Civilization. The result often becomes not relativism, but a counter-ideology with its own epistemological and ontological assumptions, and its own socio-political agenda. At the level of both theory and practice, postmodernism often simply becomes the voice of the other. As Steven Ward (1995: 109) sums it up: "postmodern deconstructionism...is now being employed as a strategy to counter the political and intellectual dominance gained by the sciences over the last few centuries."

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However, not all postmodernists like postmodernity, i.e. the emerging postmodern social conditions. Here there is a bifurcation: some postmodernists are liberal -- they like and wish to speed up the breakdown of post-Enlightenment civilization -- while others are conservative: they deplore it.

Although postmodernists are divided as to their liking of postmodernity, they all agree about its main characteristics. These have already been alluded to in the first section of this paper. The chief feature of postmodern society is the increasing blurring of reality and models of reality, of real life and art or fiction, of reality and signs, symbols, ideas and concepts which refer to reality. This is what Baudrillard (1988) calls the hyperreal. A good example is the internet: The metaphors of "information superhighway" and "cyberspace" create an image of the "internet as a virtual world in which motion and direction become possible," including moving to and from "sites" (Nunes, 1995: 287). As Baudrillard (1983:2) explains, "henceforth it is the map, that precedes the territory...it is the map that engenders the territory."

The postmodern psychological umwelt contrasts most clearly with that of modern man, while perhaps sharing characteristics with pre-modernity, when witchcraft and magic were very real. To the native American Indian, dream experiences were as real as waking ones.

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Postmodernists are divided as to their approval of postmodern culture. First the conservatives:

As far back as 1959, C. Wright Mills (1959: 166) predicted the coming of a postmodern cultural moment which would cause new forms of moral drift and alienation.

Equally apprehensive about contemporary cultural developments are members of the Frankfurt and Critical Schools, for example Jurgen Habermas and Herbert Marcuse (1964). These authors pair a leftwing attack on contemporary mass culture with a rightwing elitist cultural taste. Their argument is similar to that of Mills, who writes that "we are losing control of the very means of cultural production itself...more and more culture becomes an adjunct of marketing..." (Mills, 1963: 226). Marcuse writes that capitalism is guilty of "repressive desublimation," i.e. the Orwellian neutralization of even our most private libidinal impulses. The culture industries "produce consumer spectators of media events and escapist entertainment while subtly indoctrinating them with dominant ideologies" (Denzin quoting Kellner, 1989: 131). While all this early criticism of postmodern culture is couched in Marxian terms, these authors are actually cultural conservatives. They reject mass culture in favor of high culture. They reject new media (movies, television) in favor of old media (the print, theater). They view popular culture as decadent, vulgar, hedonistic and sexualized -- the bread and butter of the 20th century (see DeGrazia, 1964; Kando, 1980). Since America is the world's foremost producer and exporter of popular culture and the world's most postmodern society, a criticism of postmodern culture often goes hand in hand with criticism of America.

The culmination of a negative evaluation of postmodern culture is found in the works of Baudrillard (1983; 1988; 1993). The Frenchman's critique of postmodern hyperreality is compelling. As Nunes (1995:319) summarizes it, "the postmodern moment announces not the breakdown of modernity, but rather its fatal perfection." In Baudrillard's own words: "when a system rides roughshod over its own basic assumptions, supersedes its own ends...then we are contemplating not crisis but catastrophe" (Baudrillard, 1993:32).

The contrast between conservative and liberal postmodernists is perhaps best illustrated by comparing Baudrillard's views on electronic media with those of Marshall McLuhan's (1965). To Baudrillard, the hyperreal world of immediacy is a cold, desolate realm of communication and information. He refers to the electronic media as "fatal technologies" (see Nunes, 1995: 319-320). On the other hand, McLuhan's vision was always utopian, some might say naively polyannish, and so is that of some of his current followers (e.g. Docker, 1994). According to the McLuhanites, the advent of the "cool" medium (TV) produces the "global village."

Currently, similar arguments are being made in praise of the internet. Electronic bulletin boards and chat rooms can be described as virtual communities, or "electronic agorae." Some claim that "life in cyberspace...at its best is more egalitarian than elitist, and more decentered than hierarchical...In fact, life in cyberspace seems to be shaping up exactly like Thomas Jefferson would have wanted..." (Rheingold, 1993: 53). It is said that "virtual interfacing facilitates community by obscuring many social barriers (age, race and sex in particular)" (Nunes, quoting Rheingold, 1995: 325).

Not only do the optimists approve of the new forms of postmodern culture; they also tend to approve of its contents. As we saw, the old leftists of the Frankfurt School remained Eurocentric cultural elitists (while couching this in Marxian criticism). In the age-old High Culture-Mass Culture controversy, they viewed mass culture and popular culture as debased, debasing, and a medium of control.

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On the other side of the fence are found those who, quite to the contrary, embrace features of postmodern popular culture (e.g. MTV, body decorations a la Dennis Rodman, etc.). Denzin (1992: 134; 137-138; 145 et passim) for example finds value in the critique of bourgeois morality and the sympathetic analysis of popular culture. While Denzin may not feel that Ricky Lake, Montel Williams and Jenny Jones offer quality culture, he would probably find them more relevant to postmodern conditions (e.g. dysfunctional and single-headed households) than, say, the plays of Ibsen.

In my estimation, the negative aspects of postmodern culture outweigh its positive ones. I share Baudrillard's apprehensions, C. Wright Mills' pessimism, and the conservatism of many middle-class Americans. There remains today a silent majority of Americans whose consciousness is deeply rooted in modernity, who are bewildered by postmodern culture, and who stand on the right-hand side of the culture wars. It is plausible that postmodernity brings about an empirically measurable deterioration in the quality of life, for example declining

literacy rates and intolerably high rates of deviant behavior. Whether or not Denzin's videocy will become idiocy is a testable question.

The most unequivocal support of postmodernism is found in the feminist literature. As Ward (1995:120) notes, postmodern deconstructionism is a linguistic methodology. The first claim of postmodernists is that all knowledge is textualized, that one can only approach the world through language, that the world, indeed, stems from language. This assertion provides feminism with the handle for its assault on the status quo, and it explains the inherent connection between deconstructionism and feminist theory.

According to feminist theory, then, the existing culture is phallogocentric because our language is phallogocentric. The first error of our language is that it artificially divides reality into two parts -- male and female. The second error is that it relegates the female part to inferiority.

In my view, this is a contorted argument. It is true that there are other instances of classificatory reification that must be rejected. The black-white dichotomy and other racial classifications are a case in point. However, binary gender is not one of these.

The second indictment is that a female designation brings with it inferiority. This, too, is empirically questionable. Most languages do genderize objects. However, whether an object ends up masculine or feminine is a historical accident. This is clear from the fact that the same object is male in one language (e.g. sun = le soleil in french) and female in another (die Sonne in German) or vice-versa (e.g. moon = der Mond in German and la lune in French). Thus the fact that women have historically been the second sex is independent from the capricious genderization of nouns.

***It is a plausible hypothesis that postmodernity brings about an empirically measurable deterioration in the quality of life, for example declining literacy rates and intolerably high rates of deviant behavior. Whether or not Denzin's videocy will become idiocy is testable question.***

Feminist theorists also oppose the homosexual-heterosexual dichotomy (Butler, 1990). The extent to which feminists advocate lesbianism and are hostile to heterosexuality varies. Some (e.g. Kristeva, 1987) consider heterosexuality to be the prerequisite for kinship and culture, and female homosexuality to signify the emergence of psychosis in culture.

Others (e.g. Wittig, 1969) advocate all-out lesbianism and display extreme hostility to heterosexuality, viewing it as inseparable from male dominance.

The gravest contradiction in feminist theory is this: it claims to reject dichotomous thinking, but then itself engages in the most blatant form of it. For example, Alway (1995) claims simultaneously that feminist theory challenges dualistic thinking and introduces gender as a central analytical category. Leaving aside the fact that gender has been an "analytical category" for as long as Sociology has existed, isn't a renewed emphasis on this binary variable the most obvious example of dichotomous thinking?

***In the end, feminist and postmodern theories are guilty of the most monumental oppositional thinking, as they draw one huge line between white, middle-class, heterosexual males on one side, and everyone else on the other, i.e. women, people of color, homosexuals, the poor, etc. Is this a more accurate model than one which describes America as a pluralistic mosaic?***

Alway goes on to complain that, whereas postmodern theory has been well received in academia, feminist theory has not (op. cit: 217). Predictably, she attributes this to the fact that postmodern theorists such as Baudrillard, Derrida and Foucault are largely males.

If it is true that general postmodern theory has been more widely acknowledged than feminist theory, there is a more plausible explanation than Alway's alleged sexism: Feminist theory is only one application of postmodern theory. The problems addressed by postmodernists are universal, whereas gender discrimination is one specific social problem. Generic theories of domination, exploitation and marginalization make sense. They have been abundant ever since Sociology's inception, and can be subsumed under the rubric of social inequality.

There is, of course, a female and a feminist perspective, as there is a teenager perspective and a physically handicapped perspective and a white male perspective. But feminists did not discover the idea of perspective, and it applies to every group in society, each occupying its own partial place.

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Understanding this dilemma, some feminists (e.g. Butler, 1990: 103) have begun to ask just that. Some now suggest that the "Same and Other" binary is a false one as well. It is not clear, then, where this leaves the women's movement as a social movement aimed at alleviating gender inequality.

### Conclusion

Postmodernism, then, turns out to be as much a political movement as an intellectual one.

As a theoretical enterprise, it can be expected to use a certain methodology (see Demerath, 1996: 25-27). This consists largely of the linguistic deconstruction, criticism and analysis of texts, theories, labeling practices, taxonomies and classifications. This is fine, as long as it proceeds systematically, with discipline and according to canons of validity and reliability. However, most of the literature to date has been polemical rather than empirical and deductive rather than inductive.

***It is obvious that the postmodern attack comes from the left and that it is used primarily by traditionally marginalized demographic groups -- first and foremost women.***

As a political movement, postmodernism represents first of all, in Steven Ward's words "the revenge of the humanities." In other words, it is a revolution against the scientific establishment. "What is at stake in the current battle between scientific realists and postmodern deconstructionists is not so much the grand search for determining which type of knowledge better captures the way things really are...but the rather mundane task of determining which group will be able to recruit the most allies, obtain the greatest level of funding, attract the most students, and, ultimately, gain organizational, moral and ideological control of academia (Ward, 1995: 111).

The postmodernists' epistemological weapon of choice is language and the assumption that language creates reality. "Those who study language want reality to stem from language -- just as those who study nature want reality to stem from nature and those who study society want reality to stem from the social" (Ward, 1995:120).

While this is well put, it reveals, again, that postmodernists are merely following the steps of earlier linguistic determinists such as Symbolic Interactionists.

The academic struggle between what really boils down to C.P. Snow's famous two cultures -- the humanists and the scientists -- has now come to the attention of the media. The Wall Street Journal (Kimball, 1996) recently reported on an amusing incident: New York University physicist Alan Sokal has published an article alleging deep connections between quantum theory and the radical politics of deconstructionism. He asserted "that physical reality, no less than social 'reality' is at bottom a social and linguistic construct." The trouble is, Professor Sokal's article was a spoof and an attack on postmodernism!

It is obvious that the postmodernist attack comes from the Left, and that it is used primarily by traditionally marginalized demographic groups -- first and foremost women.

***If the postmodernists gain dominance within higher education, there will be neither patience nor funds to support the University among the many people who already view it as a debating society without relevance to the real world.***

Postmodern deconstructionists are on the side of feminists, gays, people of color, the recently decolonialized, etc. This is a final aspect of the continuity between this movement and classical Sociology. There is an old and venerable tradition in our field to side with the underdog (Howard Becker, 1967) and to debunk the

dominant middle-class myths (Peter Berger, 1964). Postmodernism is simply for justice and equality, as it perceives them to be. While it does not rail, a la Marx, against capitalists and multinational corporations, it targets a new list of oppressors: white males and westerners and, more importantly, ideas such as the Enlightenment and reason as well as racism, sexism and homophobia. In other words, postmodernism attributes oppression as much to forms of knowledge as to groups of people and social structures. This is fine. But there is no question that it divides the world into the forces of oppression on the one hand, and their victims on the other, and that it is an advocate for the latter.

Hollinger (1994: 186) writes that "unless the social sciences find a place for...postmodernists...(they) will...disappear." In my view, the social sciences are facing an opposite danger: Budget cutbacks are decimating our ranks. politicians and the public are clamoring for accountability and "results," whatever that means. Postmodernism is a highly esoteric and theoretical project -- interesting to some intellectuals and utterly irrelevant to the public. Already often perceived as a debating society, the university will be seen only more so if the postmodernists gain dominance. We may still call ourselves the academy, but most Americans' conception of a University -- and of what it is supposed to deliver -- differs from Plato's. The trend toward mail-order Ph.Ds and quickie 3-unit week-end seminars is frighteningly real. There will be neither patience nor funds to support us if we devote increasing amounts of our time arguing over what will appear, to many, to be the equivalent of angels and pinheads.