

## A FORMALIZATION OF POSTMODERN THEORY

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Postmodern theory is examined from the perspective of explanatory scientific theory. Although this kind of effort would be rejected by postmodernists as imposing a failed epistemology, this article nonetheless translates the arguments of prominent postmodern theorists into a series of propositions. By developing these propositions, it is possible to see how they might generate testable hypotheses that can guide the empirical assessment of the substantive arguments of sociological postmodernists. The propositions are organized under four basic headings: (1) the increasing importance of culture; (2) the destabilization and dereification of culture; (3) the increasing importance of the individual; and (4) the viability of the subject. While there is inevitably a certain amount of selectivity involved in this exercise, our hope is that the core arguments of postmodern theory are arrayed in a manner that can facilitate their empirical assessment by researchers.

### **ARTICLE:**

Sociology emerged as a discipline to explain the dramatic transformations associated with modernity, and by the beginning of the twentieth century, sociological theory and research were directed at understanding the rise of industrial capitalism, the spread of rational-legal social forms, the emerging dominance of science and the exponential increase in technologies, the expansion of urban areas, the commodification generated by new market forces, and other events associated with modernity. Over the last two decades of the century, however, a good deal of social theory in general and sociological theory in particular shifted to understanding "postmodernity."<sup>1</sup> Much of this recent work involves an epistemological critique of science per se and an attack on positivists' "naive faith" in cumulative knowledge (e.g., Brown 1987, 1990; Gottdiener 1990, 1993; Lemert 1995; Lyotard [1979] 1984; Rorty 1979, 1994). In the place of this naive faith is the view that social theories are merely one of many "texts" that have no privileged voice.

Yet it is important, we believe, to give postmodern theory a "privileged voice," if only to see what it offers sociological theory in general. There is, of course, insufficient space here to assess fully the arguments of postmodernists. Our goal is more modest: to translate, albeit somewhat selectively, postmodernists' claims into propositions that highlight the key forces that are hypothesized to be part of a "postmodern condition." For postmodernists, this translation is unnecessary; for others unsure of the arguments of postmodernism, however, this exercise can help to make postmodern theory available to a broader audience. Moreover, it can perhaps (1) stimulate further refinement of the propositions and, ideally, (2) encourage others to bring data to bear on the claims of postmodern theory. We will offer at the end some general assessments on the plausibility of postmodern theory, but these will only be preliminary.

### **DEFINING POSTMODERNISM(S)**

Beginning with Hispanic literary criticism in the 1930s, expanding into the worlds of the visual arts and architecture in the 1960s and early 1970s, and finally making inroads into social theory with the French publication of Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* ([1979] 1984), the term "postmodernism"

encompasses vast, complex, and, at times, contradictory fields. Still, one organizing feature of postmodernism is clearly discernible: postmodernism is always understood in contrast to modernism. For example, postmodernism in the literary world may be understood as a reaction against the unity of narrative. Indeed, this reaction was so strong that in the 1960s Susan Sontag (1990) pronounced the modern novel dead. In the art world, postmodernism is an attack against the perceived hegemony of modernist style—such as impressionism, cubism, symbolism, and art nouveau—and the active suppression of all external influences. In the world of architecture, postmodernism challenges the rationalization of space and the imposition of a strict and systematic order on daily life; and, in its place, some postmodern architecture makes space more personalized through the use of pastiche, the blending of styles, and the inclusion of historical references. And in social theory, postmodernism rejects grand narratives on the nature of the universe, doubts the advantages of technology, reduces science to a language game, criticizes the exigencies of the market and the hyperreality of advertising, and offers no vision of theory beyond many voices in continual play.

How, then, are we to define our topic, especially if some theorists such as Jean Baudrillard ([1976] 1993) argue that "loading the sign with the burden of 'utility,' with gravity—its form of representative equivalence—all this is over with"? We shall begin by using the definition of a "latter-day" Marxist, Fredric Jameson. Perry Anderson (1998) convincingly argues that it was the work of Jameson that captured the essence of postmodernism and moved it onto the front stage of social discourse. Jameson's power lay in taking what was then simply a concept used to depict a certain cultural style and transforming it into "a periodizing concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and new economic order" (Jameson 1998:3). According to Anderson, five "moves" allowed Jameson to make this transition. Space constraints prevent us from recounting Anderson's argument, but it appears to us that Jameson may provide us with a working definition of social postmodernism. Baudrillard would perhaps admonish us not to define anything, but as positivists we must turn to those who have offered a definition of the domain of inquiry, at least as a starting point. Drawing on Jameson, we thus define social postmodernism in parsimonious terms as a critical form of theorizing that is concerned with the unique problems that are associated with culture and subjectivity in late capitalist societies. Whether postmodernists are more concerned with late capitalism (e.g., Lash and Urry 1987, 1994), media (e.g., Baudrillard [1972] 1981, [1973] 1975, [1976] 1993, 1989, [1981] 1994), epistemology (e.g., Rorty 1979, 1994), or social theory (Brown 1987, 1990, 1993), their works all address issues of culture and subjects.

Beginning with this definition, our goal is to provide an example of what can be done from a positivistic point of view. Our sources for this exercise are limited to a few primary thinkers: Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, David Harvey, Scott Lash and John Urry, and Kenneth Gergen. This list is selective, but it is representative of the range of work in postmodern theory. Obviously, there are important thinkers not included in our list, such as Michel Foucault, Ihab Hassan, and Paul Virilio. Their exclusion should not be read as devaluing their influence on postmodern thought; rather, for the purpose of this exercise, we simply choose to remain close to our definition to examine works of most interest to sociologists.

### ***CULTURAL PROMINENCE***

Even Marxists such as Jameson and Harvey recognize that the transformations of societies in late capitalism have given prominence to cultural forces. For example, Jameson (1984, 1991, 1998) argues that the machines of late capitalism are the machines of reproduction that have allowed the "cultural logic of capitalism" to infiltrate every aspect of human existence. As a result, culture has effects equal to those of purely economic processes. Similarly, Harvey (1989) recognizes that (1) the compression of time and space by new communication and transportation technologies and (2) the commodification of images and symbols by new market forces have turned individuals' efforts to find identity and place into a search for cultural images circulated by the mass fashion market. Lash and Urry (1987) agree with Harvey's assessment but see prolonged periods of formal education and the resulting instability of adult identity as making markets for cultural images and symbols particularly salient for middle-class youth and for service professionals. From these and related approaches, the transformations in the way that culture organizes human experience are seen as the outcome of four basic forces: (1) the ever-expanding commodification of virtually everything and symbol of anything; (2) the dramatic escalation of credentialing requirements; (3) the proliferation of imaging technologies; (4) the

increasing circumvention of the symbolic boundaries of time and space. Table 1 lists general propositions on the effects of these forces in postmodern societies, emphasizing that increases in the prominence and importance of cultural symbols are a positive and additive (perhaps multiplicative) function of the level and rate of commodification, the level of credentialing, the level of imaging technology, and the distancing of time and space.

**TABLE 1**  
The Increasing Importance of Culture

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- I. The relative significance of culture over material social structures in a society is a positive and additive (and probably multiplicative) function of
    - A. The level of commodification of objects, people, and symbols marking differences, which is a positive function of the volume, velocity, and extensiveness of market, which, in turn, are a positive additive function of
      - 1. the multiplicative effects between capitalist production and ideology, on the one hand, and scientific inquiry and ideology, on the other, in driving the constant expansion of production
      - 2. the extent to which production allows satisfaction of basic needs so that the discretionary purchase of symbols becomes possible
      - 3. the level of abstraction of money as an accepted and stable marker of relative values, which, in turn, is a positive and additive function of
        - a. the rationalization of communication and transportation infrastructures that expand trade relying on stable currencies
        - b. the extensiveness, volume, and velocity of markets, especially meta-markets exchanging the instruments of value and capital formation themselves
      - 4. the level of advertising of goods and commodities available in markets, which, in turn, is a positive and additive function of
        - a. the conditions listed under III-C above
        - b. the level of imaging technology and infrastructure to visually represent commodities (see Proposition I-D below)
    - B. The level of formal credentialing of individuals, which is a positive and additive function of the level of the division of labor and, more generally, differentiation in a society, which, in turn, are a positive and additive function of
      - 1. the degree to which flexible capitalism is practiced
      - 2. the level of competition among individuals for positions in productive organizations and for the material and symbolic resources these provide
      - 3. the level of manufacturing technology as it expands the range of skills in production
      - 4. the level of intellectual technology and infrastructure producing this technology, which, in turn, is a multiplicative function of
        - a. the level of development of higher education and ideologies supporting such development
        - b. the level of scientific activity and ideologies supporting the constant expansion of knowledge
        - c. the degree to which capitalist practice and ideology rely on marketing new knowledge

*(Continued)*

### **Commodification and Culture**

Postmodernism is, at its core, a critique of capitalism and the ideology of science that produces the innovations and technologies that keep the capitalist engine running. Thus it is not surprising that the Marxian notion of commodification is central to this critique (Lukács [1922] 1971; Marx [1867] 1977; Marx and Engels [1848] 1961), but it is taken in interesting directions by postmodern theory. For, as many postmodernists argue (e.g., Baudrillard [1972] 1981; Harvey 1989;

**TABLE 1**  
(Continued)

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- C. The level of imaging technology, products, and infrastructures increasing the number and quantity of visual images, which, in turn, is a positive and multiplicative function of
    - 1. the level of communication and transportation technologies and infrastructures
    - 2. the expansiveness and velocity of markets
    - 3. the degree to which distribution depends on advertising
  - D. The increasing circumvention of symbolic boundaries tied to time and place, which, in turn, is a positive and additive function of
    - 1. the level of development in communication and transportation technologies and infrastructures for compressing time and physical space and for disseminating new cultural symbols
    - 2. the level of development, expansion, and velocity of markets for capitalist distribution
    - 3. the deconcentration and globalization of capital in order to avoid overaccumulation, which, in turn, are a positive function of
      - a. the rate and level of local capital accumulation
      - b. the conditions listed under V-A and V-B
      - c. the velocity and abstraction of money circulation in meta-markets
    - 4. the number and diversity of available cultural identities, which, in turn, is a positive and additive function of
      - a. the decreasing viability of grand cultural narratives
      - b. the rate and degree of social and cultural differentiation

Lash 1988), the dynamics of commodification eventually push production past both use value and exchange value to products that are essentially symbolic. Commodities are increasingly valued for their status significance rather than their actual use or capacity to facilitate exchanges; instead, they are markers of positions, affiliations, identifications, memberships, and prestige. As the importance of commodities for marking symbolically a person's place increases, the power of culture also increases, since ever more commodities are symbolic (Proposition I in Table 1).

The level and rate of commodification are, first of all, a function of capitalist production and the associated ideology of constant growth in search of profits to stimulate continued investments, coupled with technological innovations of science and the associated ideology of ever-expanding, objective knowledge (I-A-1). Such production is both an effect and a cause of the velocity and extensiveness of markets (I-A-2). Only when markets are sufficiently developed so that they can provide for basic needs can they begin to sell symbols on a mass scale; and in order to drive capitalist expansion, this new form of commodification becomes an increasingly prominent feature of a postmodern society. The volume and velocity of exchanges in markets are crucial to this new form of commodification, because only when markets can move large volumes of commodities rapidly do symbols inevitably become new profit-making products that can be packaged and repackaged rapidly as advertising constantly shifts market demand. Commodification depends not only on the volume and velocity of exchanges in markets but also on the extensiveness of markets. As markets extend to all parts of a nation and to most parts of the globe, the ability to sell the symbols of groups and organizations to new and distant market niches increases, with the result that the symbols of status groups and organizations in diverse regions can circulate back and forth to new markets as commodities. Only in systems with expanding production can this type of commodification move from use value and exchange value to symbolic value. One cannot eat and reside in symbols, and so capitalist production must have led to a sufficient level of development that individuals have the resources, time, and inclination to begin purchasing commodities for their symbolic value.

Commodification beyond use value and exchange value depends on the abstraction and circulation of money as an accepted and stable marker of relative values (I-A-3). This abstraction of money, in turn, depends on the rationalization of distribution and the development of communication and transportation infrastructures that

send goods rapidly to distant markets and that facilitate the exchange of currencies used to purchase goods and services. Without money that is itself a symbol of value, as well as its conversion via money markets into the monetary symbols of other societies, commodification is limited to barter within national borders. But the invention of rapid systems of transportation and even more rapid forms of communication and trade, coupled with the emergence of meta-markets dealing in the instantaneous exchange of money and other instruments of value in capitalist systems (e.g., stocks, bonds, mortgages, insurance premiums, derivatives), dramatically changes the nature of exchange. Now the volume and velocity of exchanges can increase, as can the scope and expansiveness of exchange.

Advertising is critical to the process of commodification (I-A-4). Advertising not only informs but stimulates market demand; and in this way it expands markets. Conversely, advertising is only effective with extensive and high-velocity markets, with high-speed transportation and communication technologies and infrastructures, and with imaging technologies to visually represent commodities to consumers. Under these conditions, advertising encourages the selling of symbols, especially as basic needs are satisfied, or it can encourage the consumption of products that at one level meet basic needs but at a more symbolic level communicate status, membership, and other culturally defined differences.

These dynamic processes, all of which are interrelated, change capitalism in this sense: capitalists increasingly seek to produce and market commodities signifying cultural categories and group memberships above and beyond whatever use value and exchange value they may have. In so doing, culture becomes more paramount as its symbols become subject to market forces and capitalists' need to constantly expand production. Thus capitalism eventually begins not only to colonize but also to destroy the lifeworlds of cultural groups as their symbols are commodified to everyone with the money to purchase them.

### **Credentialing and Culture**

Credentialing is seen by some postmodernists to increase the power of culture because it provides new symbols for marking differences and for determining access to jobs, social standing, status groups, and other valued social niches (Lash and Urry 1987, 1994). Moreover, credentialing expands the educational system, which, in turn, produces new sets of symbols that raise the overall level of cultural production in a society.

Credentialing is a positive function of the level of the division of labor or differentiation (I-B). The expansion of the division of labor is an additive function of flexible accumulation of capital and other elements of production that increase the efficiency of organizations' coordinating specialists (I-B-1). The practices of flexible capitalism—such as just-in-time resource management, small batch production, subcontracting and outsourcing, and portfolio management—increase the differentiation of labor and markets. As market expansion increases the scale of production and the competition among workers for jobs and social niches, it speeds up the rate at which labor is divided (I-B-2). And as markets become the driving force behind selection of individuals in terms of their skills, the use of credentials as markers of their respective social, technical, and psychological skills increases in order to "rationalize" job allocation. In this, credentials further commodification of labor by sorting and selecting individuals in terms of the general and particularized culture they are presumed to possess by virtue of their credentials. And as labor markets respond to changes in production technologies, they increasingly demand reskilling and recredentialing of individuals during their life course.

Expansion of manufacturing technologies forces changes in the division of labor, generally driving up the skills of workers and the reliance on credentials to certify their skills (I-B-3). Thus manufacturing technologies not only increase the number of niches in social and cultural space, they also change the very nature of these niches. And when such changes can be translated into market demand, forcing individuals to reskill themselves if they are to find job niches, markets operate to encourage further changes in the nature of manufacturing and, thereby, in the nature and number of niches that are available to individuals who have now become ever more commodified, selected, and sorted by credentials. Moreover, manufacturing technologies will increase the division of labor as they are expanded and used to produce more goods and services; and as they do so, they

increase differentiation of social experiences, leading to the development of specialized languages and other forms of particularized culture.

The division of labor is also influenced by intellectual technology (I-B-4). As first proposed by Bell (1976:27-33) and used by postmodern scholars such as Harvey (1989), the concept of intellectual technology emphasizes that one of the products of late capitalism is knowledge about how to coordinate actors in new and more productive ways. Such "social" technology becomes as important as manufacturing technology in determining the productivity of labor; and because a significant portion of social technology is produced in educational settings, demand for higher levels of credentialing among those who are to implement social technologies in manufacturing increases, thereby expanding the array of symbols that can be used to mark differences (I-B-4-a). This reliance of production on all types of technologies also depends on the level of scientific inquiry and associated ideologies for constant expansion of knowledge (I-B-4-b), coupled with capitalist practice and ideology that make it profitable to generate new knowledge that can be marketed as a commodity (I-B-4-c).

### **Imaging and Culture**

Postmodern theorists generally stress the significance of visual media for culture and individual identity. In particular, they are critical of advertising; and for some scholars like Baudrillard ([1981] 1994:6), television images are seen to have "no relation to reality whatsoever." Postmodernists emphasize that humans have a fascination with images, and as the number and quality of images increase, not only is culture increasingly a series of visual images, but self and identity are increasingly defined in terms of media images rather than real social relations. Oral and written culture thus begin to be dominated by the visual image, but the bulk of these images are generated by advertising designed to enhance capitalists' profits, thereby taking culture away from a firm material base (except, of course, capitalists' material desires to make profits from market demand for cultural images).

The increase in the number and quality of images is a function of three driving forces, which themselves are interconnected (I-C). This increase in imaging is a function of the development of communication and transportation technologies (I-C-1), the expansiveness and velocity of markets that create profit-oriented incentives to produce images (I-C-2), and the increasing importance of advertising as a force in markets (I-C-3). Together, these forces produce constantly shifting visual images that inundate individuals in postmodern societies, changing the nature of culture and personal identity in ways heretofore unknown in the modern world.

### **Symbolic Boundaries of Time and Space**

For many postmodernists, the technologies and infrastructures that allow for the rapid dissemination of cultural images change the nature of culture so that it can no longer readily symbolize relationships and structures located in time and place. Local place and time become subordinated to the rapid circulation of cultural images, creating a period of "liminality" in which the significance of place and time decreases. This void in cultural space becomes ever more important for individuals' sense of identity and their organization of meaning. During this process, the symbols of culture circumvent traditional cultural markers and boundaries, increasingly destroying lifeworlds and traditional cultural meanings. Symbols are lifted out of groups, marketed, and consumed as commodities on a global scale, thereby breaking the hold of older cultural systems on individuals' perceptions of self and their interpretations of the world. In this way, local cultures diffuse very rapidly and are commodified in high-volume, high-velocity, and expansive markets fueled by advertising and capitalists' need to develop new commodities in order to sustain profits. These processes, in turn, are possible because of the general prosperity in advanced capitalist systems, which gives individuals more discretionary money to spend on commodified symbols. Thus groups can no longer protect their symbols in time and place, and they become "free-floating signifiers" (Jameson 1991) that have lost their original meaning. In this way, culture becomes more paramount but less real in the sense of anchoring people to place and time.

The level of development in communication and transportation technologies and infrastructures, coupled with capitalists' interests in extensive and high-velocity markets, enables cultural space to dominate over local

cultural systems and, moreover, to increase the capacity of cultural symbols to circumvent cultural boundaries (I-D-1, 2). The deconcentration of capital is crucial to this process of time-space distancing (I-D-3). Capital can now move rapidly as labor costs and market demands shift around the world, with the result that capital becomes less tied to place and local sociocultural forces. Such deconcentration is sought in order to avoid local crises of capital accumulation and becomes possible by virtue of communication and transportation technologies and infrastructures, high-velocity and expanded market systems, and rapid circulation of money through the meta-markets of the world system.

The number and diversity of cultural identities increase as symbols are lifted, commodified, and marketed in ways that circumvent local group and cultural boundaries (I-D-1, 2, 3). These processes have helped to destroy the viability and salience of grand interpretive narratives that provide cultural boundaries and meanings tied to groups located in space and situated within local time frames. Further, grand narratives have lost their influence because of the failure of Western, state-initiated colonization and the scientific doubt that permeates the culture. And as the power of grand narratives declines, more cultural space is opened for free-floating signifiers. The degree of social and cultural differentiation is both an effect and a cause of these processes. As differentiation increases under expanded production and market forces, especially under competition to secure resources in labor markets where credentialing dominates, individuals have an interest in creating and selling new cultures and identities, particularly those that can carry new credentials that might give an edge in the market. The result is that ever more cultural identities are created and, ironically, subject to capitalist commodification and marketing; and these processes are exacerbated by the influence of mass media and advertising. These dynamics, in the end, increase the number of cultural identities available for dissemination, thereby increasing the significance of cultural space.

### ***CULTURAL INSTABILITY AND DEREIFICATION***

Postmodern theory emphasizes that a fundamental break between symbols and reality has occurred. The signs and symbols that people use no longer correspond to a material reality; and as a result, culture is unstable and loses its capacity to make the world seem real and obdurate.

For Baudrillard, a "decisive turning point" in the history of the sign was facilitated by the media and advertising. He argues that the media takes the natural entropy within the information process to the extreme. Any information of an event is a degraded form of the event and represents a dissolving of the social. The media pushes this entropy to an extreme, since it provides a constant barrage of information that has been removed an infinite number of times from the actual social event. The media also destroys information because it comes prepackaged in a meaning form. Information is staged by the media, and subjects are told what constitutes their particular relationship to the information. Thus the presentation of information through the media is a system of self-referencing simulation. Further, the break between reality and the sign is facilitated by advertising: "Today what we are experiencing is the absorption of all virtual modes of expression into that of advertising" (Baudrillard [1981] 1994:87). The act of advertising itself reduces objects from their use value to their sign value; for as advertisements become commodities in and of themselves, image rather than information becomes the content of the commodity.

For Lyotard, this destabilization is principally due to changes in the economic and institutional realms (à la Bell [1973, 1976] and Touraine [1971]), leading to doubt concerning grand narratives about the world. Jameson also links the destabilization of culture to changes in the mode of production, to machines of reproduction, and to the triumph of the capitalistic cultural logic through multinational capitalism. The problem of representing multinational capitalism along with the explosion of signs emanating from the mass media and the superseding of the message by its mode of expression have resulted in a proliferation of social codes and the loss of a national language. The outcome has been a breakdown in the signification chain—what Jameson characterizes as the schizophrenia of culture.

The emergence of postmodern society involves, therefore, a destabilization and dereification of culture. The conditions generating this cultural instability are listed in Table 2, Proposition II. Two basic conditions cause destabilization: (1) deinstitutionalization and (2) circumvention of symbolic boundaries.

### **Deinstitutionalization**

Institutionalization revolves around (a) structured patterns of action and interaction, (b) legitimating myths and symbols for such patterns, and (c) cultural symbols carrying emotional and moral overtones.

Deinstitutionalization is the converse of these forces, whereby actions, interactions, and interpersonal rituals no longer are controlled and constrained by structures, whereby legitimating myths and symbols supporting structures are all subject to challenge, and whereby cultural symbols become emotionally flat and less clear as to their moral meanings (II-A).

Structural differentiation tends to create differences in, and conflicts among, particularized cultures, which, in turn, lower the capacity of culture to remain reified across all nodes of difference, to provide legitimating myths and symbols that cut across society, and to communicate a sense of common history and perhaps destiny (II-A-1). As Emile Durkheim ([1893] 1984) recognized long ago, differentiation "enfeebles" the regulatory power of collective conscience.

Transportation and communication technologies and infrastructures destabilize culture not only by their effects on structural differentiation but also by their ability to move people, materials, and information rapidly across space and in time (II-A-2). As symbols circulate long distances and in rapid succession, as people move in careers and travel, and as time and space are thereby compressed, culture loses its capacity to provide stable meanings in local spaces and over time. All is

**TABLE 2**  
Cultural Destabilization and Dereification

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- II. The degree of cultural destabilization and dereification in society is a positive and additive function of
- A. The degree of deinstitutionalization in which structural constraints on interaction are weakened, legitimating cultural myths are challenged, and cultural symbols are emotionally flat and unclear in their meaning. Such deinstitutionalization is a positive and additive function of
    - 1. the level of structural differentiation
    - 2. the level of transportation and communication technologies and infrastructures
    - 3. the level of market velocity and expansiveness
    - 4. the level and rate of commodification
    - 5. the level of institutional doubt
  - B. The level of circumvention of symbolic boundaries, which are a positive function of
    - 1. the level of development in communication and transportation technologies and infrastructures for compressing time and physical space and for disseminating new cultural symbols
    - 2. the level of development, expansion, and velocity of markets for capitalist distribution
    - 3. the deconcentration and globalization of capital in order to avoid overaccumulation, which, in turn, are a positive function of
      - a. the rate and level of local capital accumulation
      - b. the conditions listed under V-A and V-B
      - c. the velocity and abstraction of money circulation in meta-markets
    - 4. the number and diversity of available cultural identities, which, in turn, are a positive and additive function of
      - a. the decreasing viability of grand cultural narratives
      - b. the rate and degree of social and cultural differentiation

in flux and change, causing problems for individuals in sustaining their sense of culture as "a reality out there."



Market velocity and expansion only amplify the effects of transportation and communication technologies (II-A-3), especially as symbols become commodified and placed into circulation by the capitalist economic system (II-A-4). As symbols become commodified, they take on a reality as a thing, true enough, but, because of the ever-shifting nature of markets, not a thing that orders meanings, actions, and interactions in the way the implicit reification of culture as an obdurate reality once did. Culture becomes even trivialized as it loses its stature as a firm reality and becomes yet one more object to be marketed. And high-velocity and extended markets reaching around the world assure that no symbol or sign is safe from commodification, once it reveals to capitalists the possibility for profits.

Finally, as postmodern societies become dominated by the ideology of science, by capitalist expansion, and by credentialing, knowledge and information are constantly transformed. All is subject to revision and change, making it difficult to sustain continuity of information in space and across time. Doubt becomes chronic and institutionalized (II-A-5), and while people adapt to constant change in the knowledge bases and the credentials that they will have to possess to succeed, such adaptations do not provide a firm basis on which hang meanings that last over time and that dominate locales in space. Rather, adaptation occurs within an accepted framework of uncertainty and doubt.

### **Circumvention of Symbolic Boundaries**

The forces listed above operate to break down the barriers of culture (II-B). Culture is no longer tied to a time and place, but rather it is subject to marketing forces fueled by capitalist profit seeking. Symbols and portions of them can be lifted from real groupings in place and marketed to others; and as they are marketed, they can penetrate other cultural systems, reducing the continuity and stability of the latter. What emerges is the rapid circulation of symbols carrying somewhat flat and often trivialized meanings, which then erode the reified meanings of cultural systems that once invoked among individuals emotional investments and moral overtones. In the end, boundaries of symbols become so porous as to lose their ability to provide meanings for individuals.

### ***THE INDIVIDUALIZED SELF***

Subjectivity and individual identity are major concerns of postmodern social theory. As social activity becomes deinstitutionalized and thus not attached to a particular place, as grand narratives lose their ability to embrace large groups with a sense of a collective identity, as markets focus on individual tastes and expressions, as differentiation escalates to the point where each person is the locus of many groups, and as communication and transportation technologies systematically break down the symbolic barriers between groups, individuals and their identities increase in importance.

For example, Lash and Urry (1987, 1994) argue that as capitalist relations have become mobile and decentralized, large collectives (such as corporations, workplaces, and cities) have diminished effects on identity formation. Markets and media have rushed to fill this void and have provided for the individual a diversity of identities from which to choose. Harvey (1989) also notes that one of the results of flexible capitalism is an increased search for eternal but simple truths and personal identity. The aesthetics of place (i.e., the status hierarchy of social space/ identity divorced from the function of space) have become increasingly important in this time-space compression of flexible capitalism, for the use of place "allows the construction of some limited and limiting sense of identity in the midst of a collage of imploding spatialities" (Harvey 1989:304).

But, at the same time, most postmodernists posit a fragmented self that has no essence, only images. Jameson (1984) contends that the simple and indivisible ego-self existed at one time, during the period of classical capitalism and the nuclear family, but has come to an end in the postmodern era. He argues that the culture of the postmodern "stands as something like an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, as yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions" (Jameson 1984:80). And this impossible demand of culture has created a fragmented rather than alienated subject.

Baudrillard (1983) explicitly links the "death" of the subject to mass media—the subject lives "no longer as an actor or dramaturge but as a terminal of multiple networks" (p. 128). And Gergen (1991) builds on Baudrillard's

insights into the media and argues that increases in communication and transportation technologies— what Gergen refers to as the technologies of social saturation—escalated dramatically the sheer numbers, diversity, frequency of contact, endurance through time, and level of expressed intensity of social encounters. Individuals today are inundated with knowledge concerning different groups, different people, different values, and different modes of expression. The development of this postmodern consciousness has resulted in an increase in the amount of reflexivity in which individuals engage. This increased reflexivity is directed toward the self as people increase their self-monitoring in a culture that is socially saturated and filled with constant change and doubt. The result is what Gergen refers to as "multiphernia"—vertigo of self-values filled with expressions of inadequacy— and the pastiche personality.

The conditions generating the individuated self are listed in Table 3, Proposition III. Cultural destabilization and dereification are crucial forces in the individualization of self, because, as culture loses its center and stability and as the rate of circulation of symbols across older boundaries increases (i.e., symbolic circumvention), the individual as an object onto itself provides an alternative locus of meaning (III-A).

The dynamic relations among market velocity and scope, advertising, and commodification accelerate the individualization of self directly (III-B) and, indirectly, by virtue of their effects on destabilizing and dereifying culture (II). Free markets catering to demand encourage the individualization of consumer tastes and give individuals the sense that they indeed choose for themselves what they desire and want. This force becomes ever more powerful as capitalism creates affluence, giving individuals the ability to increasingly engage in discretionary spending. Advertising is, of course, designed to emphasize that it is the individual's choice to purchase products, and indeed, the tone of advertising in postmodern societies

**TABLE 3**  
The Increasing Importance of the Individual

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- III. The increasing significance of self, whereby meanings are ever more tied to the individual, as opposed to collectivities, and shared culture is a positive and additive function of
    - A. The level of cultural destabilization and dereification in a society (see Table 2)
    - B. The level of the multiplicative effects among
      - 1. the level of market velocity and expansiveness
      - 2. the level of advertising
      - 3. the level of commodification
    - C. The level of social and cultural diversity, or differentiation
    - D. The level of communication and transportation technologies and infrastructures

moves from "the hard sell" to a softer, more diffuse imagery in which options are portrayed in ways that give individuals (the illusionary) belief that they are exercising their free will in selecting commodities to buy. Indeed, much advertising takes on a public information format, as is evidenced in recent times by the ubiquitous "infomercial." These market forces, as they are driven by advertising, increase the rate of commodification, which makes virtually anything available for purchase, and, thereby, give individuals the sense that they have unlimited options. And as cultural symbols become commodified, what once served as a collective source of individual meaning about self becomes one more consumer good, thereby giving individuals the feeling that they act as lone actors in markets for cultural symbols now in rapid circulation and detached from the collectives to which they once gave coherent meanings.

Social and cultural differentiation further give individuals a sense of standing between structures and symbols rather than within them (III-C). Georg Simmel ([1903] 1971; [1908] 1971; [1922] 1955) first made this point, and it has been given added emphasis by Bauman (1992), who argues that the group is "unable to override the diversity of its supporters' interests and thus claim and secure their total allegiance and identification" (p. 197). As individuals move about in groups in a greatly expanded web of affiliations, they have a sense of being marginal to all groups, with the result that they experience self as a unique entity not immersed in any one collectivity or cultural system. Moreover, the often-conflicting expectations associated with different groups as well as the conflicts among the associated cultural systems of these groups force individuals to reconcile these conflicts, a process that only highlights the individual's perception of having to choose among inconsistencies.

Further, individuals increasingly must shift allegiances as they move from group to group, and they must adopt often-divergent symbols, forcing on them the sense that they are not embedded in any one group or culture but in many. This sense, in turn, offers additional evidence to individuals that they choose their own modes of adopting and adapting expectations of diverse groups and associated cultural symbols.

The effects of communication and transportation technologies and infrastructures further accelerate the individualization of self (III-D). Communication technologies increasingly give individuals mediated or saturated experiences in which they are exposed to accounts of situations and others with whom they have no direct association. This kind of constant intrusion of images from afar, outside one's local group affiliations and cultures, generates a tension between local place and time, on the one hand, and the more distant and global world presented as images in which time and place are compressed or made irrelevant, on the other. Again, this makes the individual marginal to both the local world of real time and place, on the one side, and the more cosmopolitan world where time and place lose their meaning, on the other; and such marginality makes individuals more self-aware and more cognizant of choice. Moreover, as images of options in politics, social movements, and lifestyle are presented as mediated experiences, individuals perceive that they have options as individuals outside any constraints that now exist in their local groups and cultures.

Thus the postmodern condition creates an individualized self that gives individuals a sense of freedom and efficacy but that makes them more emotionally flat and blasé because of their lack of immersion in those local groups and coherent systems of cultural symbols that generate emotional attachments, especially as they are reaffirmed through ritualized face-to-face interaction.

### ***THE DECENTERED SUBJECT***

One of the ironies of the individual becoming ever more important and increasingly the locus of social and cultural organization is that there is a corresponding decline in the degree of viability of the individual subject. These kinds of concerns about the loss of the subject, anchored in culturally stable and legitimated systems

**TABLE 4**  
The Viability of the Subject

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- IV. The declining viability of the individual subject is a positive and additive function of
- A. Sensory overload and the resulting cognitive blockage as a mechanism to cope with such sensory overload, which, in turn, are a positive and additive function of
    - 1. the level of commodification and market velocity of images
    - 2. the level of credentialing requiring a constant expansion and redefinition of individuals' qualifications
    - 3. the level of communication and transportation technologies and infrastructures that increase the number, diversity, and speed with which images circulate
    - 4. the level of cultural circumvention in which cultural symbols are extracted and then circulated across structural and cultural boundaries as images
  - B. The level of emotional flatness of individuals and the associated inability to invest in either culture or structures, which, in turn, are a positive and additive function of
    - 1. the degree and rate of environmental change, which, in turn, are a positive and additive function of
      - a. the rate of technological innovation causing new social and cultural forms to emerge
      - b. the rate and extent of differentiation creating ever more divisions and forcing increasing adjustments to new social niches
      - c. the level of market velocity and expansiveness causing commodification and rapid circulation of cultural images and symbols
      - d. the destabilization and dereification of culture so as to decrease the institutionalization and the stability of cultural boundaries
    - 2. the degree to which interactions and associated rituals are diverse and divergent, which, in turn, are positive and additive functions of
      - a. the level and rate of differentiation, especially the division of labor
      - b. the destabilization and dereification of culture so as to decrease the institutionalization and the stability of cultural boundaries
  - C. The rate of reflexivity about self, which, in turn, is a positive and additive function of
    - 1. the level of communication and transportation technologies and infrastructures as they generate images, information, and options of self-assessment and choice
    - 2. the level of institutionalized doubt and uncertainty about the places, locations, affiliations, cultural symbols, and structures for self-anchorage

of cultural symbols and affiliated with stable group structures, lead postmodernists to conclude that self is less viable. Such loss of viability is the result of three sets of conditions, summarized in Table 4, Proposition IV. Harvey's (1989) notion of "sensory block" and Gergen's (1991) idea of "social saturation" emphasize that subjects in a postmodern world must cope with sensory overload that, in turn, causes cognitive blockage as a mechanism for coping with this overload (IV-A). Whatever the exact vocabulary, the idea is that as the absolute number of stimuli increases, individuals must edit and select, but eventually as stimuli increase to the point of cognitive overload, people will shut off their ability to apprehend more information. They simply reach a saturation point and begin to block out information and, as a consequence, become dulled to the world.

Sensory overload and blockage come with the high levels of commodification, which, in turn, are made possible by markets presenting a constant and escalating menu of new images for individuals to consider (IV-A-1). Credentialing also contributes to sensory overload and blockage as individuals must cope with chronic change and expansion of credential requirements in their work lives and in their efforts to gain status and privilege (IV-A-2). Communication and transportation technologies and infrastructures only increase the speed with which markets can present new commodified images and the redefinitions of credentials required in labor and status markets (IV-A-3). The lack of a cultural center and the porous boundaries that exist in postmodern societies accelerate sensory overload directly (IV-A-4) and, we might add, indirectly as the lack of a cultural center facilitates commodification of symbols.

Not only does cognitive blockage occur under conditions of postmodernity, but individuals become emotionally disabled and unable to invest emotionally in others, structures, and systems of symbols (IV-B). Harvey's concern with the "blasé attitude," Jameson's conception of "emotional flatness," and Baudrillard's "death of the subject" all capture this basic idea: people in a postmodern society cannot invest their emotions in stable

symbolic entities, in stable patterns of interaction, and in social structures lodged in time and place and carrying with them legitimating symbols. Finally, the declining viability of the subject comes from too much reflexivity (IV-C); for as more and more information about self is presented to the individual in a milieu of doubt at ever more speed, self-reflection does not lead to a stable self but rather one that is perpetually subject to change, thereby denying individuals the sense of well-being that comes from a stable identity. In sum, then, the viability of self declines as sensory overload and blockage increase, as emotional investments in culture and social structures decline, and as reflexivity intensifies. The respective conditions that generate these three sources of invariability of the subject are specified in the remaining propositions.

The inability to invest emotionally in others, structures, and cultural symbols is the result of incessant environmental change (IV-B-1). This change is generated by high rates of technological innovation, high levels of social differentiation that force constant adjustments to new social niches, high levels of market velocity and expansion that lead to the rapid circulation of commodified images and symbols, and high levels of destabilization and dereification of culture that undermine the coherence and boundaries of culture.

The sheer diversity and divergence of interaction rituals in which individuals must engage also lowers their ability to invest emotionally in any one group (IV-B-2). Such diversity and divergence in the nature of expectations, rituals, and interactions from situation to situation is caused by the high levels and escalating rates of differentiation, particularly the division of labor, and by corresponding destabilization and dereification of culture symbols that once gave boundaries to interactions in ways that encouraged emotional investments. Thus postmodern society presents such constant change and such high levels of diversity and divergence in sociocultural arrangements that it becomes difficult for the individual to find a stable core in social structures and cultural symbols in which to invest his or her emotions. Instead, as individuals cope with change and diversity in structures and symbols, they simply routinize their interaction rituals in ways that keep them from charging up their emotional energy and emotional commitments beyond mere politeness and etiquette.

As individuals engage in cognitive blockage and as they become emotionally flat, they ironically become more reflexive about self (IV-C). Communication and transportation technologies and infrastructures generate (often through market dynamics of commodification and advertising) so many images and options for self-evaluation and self-assessment that reflexivity about self increases to the point that no core remains (IV-C-1). In addition, as postmodern dynamics erode cultural boundaries and cause hyper-differentiation and change, doubt and uncertainty become institutionalized, as a facet of scientific reasoning and as something that always must exist in a world in which cultural boundaries cannot be maintained and where affiliations must traverse many diverse and divergent structures (IV-C2). Such doubt and uncertainty make individuals self-aware and self-reflexive but, at the same time, unable to generate a stable sense of identity.

### ***CONCLUSION AND PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT***

Many sociologists have rejected postmodernism as too arcane and obscure, but our sense is that important substantive arguments are being made in this approach. In translating these into propositions, we are in a better position to evaluate the plausibility of postmodern theory. Naturally, we have imported an epistemology that has been rejected by postmodernism, but if postmodern statements are to reach the vast majority of sociologists, who still accept much of the epistemology of science, the propositions in Tables 1 through 4 can be seen as a beginning, though selective, effort to make postmodern theory more readily accessible to sociologists and perhaps other social scientists as well.

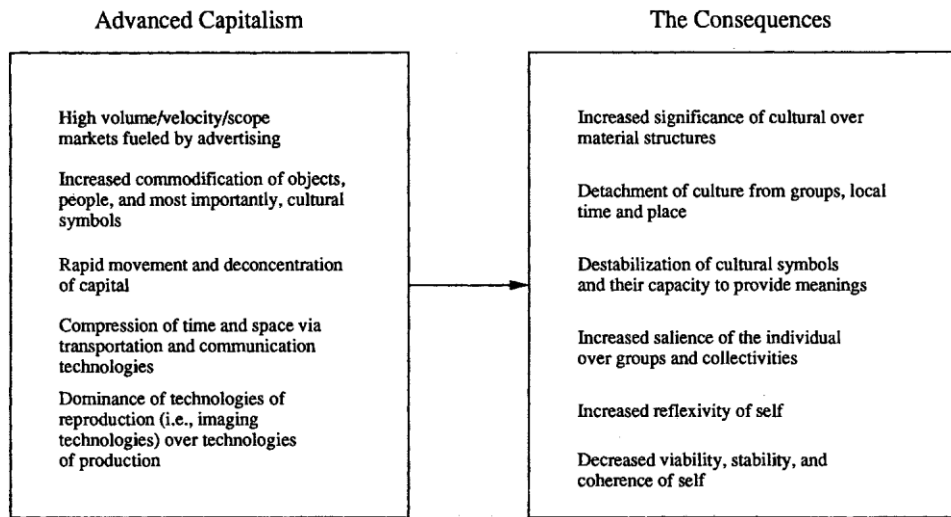
We can begin assessing postmodern theory by asking what is new, above and beyond classical modernist theorizing. Postmodern arguments about transportation and communication processes sit prominently in Durkheim ([1893] 1971); the concern over the effects of rapid and extensive differentiation also can be found in Durkheim ([1893] 1984) and in both Spencer (1898) and Simmel ([1903] 1971), who postulated more favorable effects of hyper-differentiation; the statements on market velocity and exchange can be found in Marx and Engels ([1848] 1961), Simmel ([1903] 1971, [1907] 1990), and Spencer (1898); the propositions on globalization of markets as part of world system processes can be glimpsed in Weber (1968); the arguments

about commodification obviously come from Marx (Marx [1867] 1977; Marx and Engels [1848] 1961); and the notion of changes in webs of affiliation, the role of money, and the problems of marginality in differentiated systems can all be seen in various works by Simmel ([1903] 1971, [1908] 1971, [1922] 1955); the seeds of concern with the decentered subject and the individuated self are in Durkheim's portrayal of egoism and in Simmel's analysis of marginality as well as in Marx's notion of alienation. Thus postmodern theory addresses many of the same issues as modernist theorizing, and for this reason alone, we need to pay attention to the arguments that they develop. Postmodern theory extends classical modernist theory in new ways, but the lineage to classical theory is evident—if one looks.

Perhaps more important, however, are the unique points of emphasis in postmodern theory: the influence of imaging technologies, the prominence of advertising, the extension of commodification to cultural symbol systems, the truly global world system built on high-velocity markets and meta-markets, the expansion of capitalist practice and ideology to virtual total domination of the world economy, and the ironic effects of democratization and individualistic values on unraveling the center of culture and self. Thus postmodern theory clearly moves beyond modernist theory. For while all theorists of modernity worried about the loss of cultural coherence and the fate of the individual and community under conditions of capitalist modes of production, high-volume and high-velocity markets, and differentiation, none of the theorists took these ideas as far as postmodernists, nor could they visualize the effects of instantaneous communication, rapid travel, and the proliferation of imaging technologies. There is, then, something new here, and now we need to ask: Are the pronouncements about the increasing importance of culture, the destabilization and dereification of culture, the individualization of self, the decentering of the subject, and inviability of the individual plausible?

It would be desirable to assess the empirical plausibility of each proposition in Tables 1 through 4, but, obviously, this kind of exercise is beyond the scope of a single article. Nonetheless, the propositions can encourage others to develop more refined hypotheses that can be tested. Again, this kind of work is alien to postmodern epistemology, but it is critical in a positivistic assessment of postmodern theory. Among postmodernists themselves, there have been a number of interesting empirically based studies, but these tend not to assess directly the outcomes of the postmodern condition presented in Tables 1 through 4. Rather, they tend to explore the forces causing these outcomes, with the outcomes—that is, the increasing importance of culture, the destabilization of culture, the increasing significance of the individual, and the inviability of subjects—being less critically assessed with data.

One way to visualize this last point is outlined, albeit in simplistic form, in Figure 1. The forces on the left are presumed in much postmodern theory to cause the outcomes listed on the right (we make no effort here to delineate specific causal paths, but this could be easily done). Postmodernism is strongest, we think, when the forces on the left are highlighted, because these do indeed seem to be empirically true, even with only a cursory examination of the trends in late-twentieth century capitalism. It would be rather easy to pull together data documenting these trends in advanced capitalism and in the rapid globalization of the economy



**Figure 1**  
The Postmodern Condition

over the last decades. The more problematic question is whether the outcomes listed on the right of the figure are empirically true. Our sense is that these outcomes tend to be seen as inevitable by postmodernists, but, in fact, they should from a positivist's point of view be considered hypotheses that have varying degrees of plausibility but that have not been systematically examined empirically. Let us take each of these points on the right, again acknowledging that they represent gross simplifications, and ask the questions, Are these empirically plausible? And, if so, to what degree?

Has culture become more prominent during postmodernity, even to the point of being more significant than material structures? It is clear that there are many more systems of symbols in circulation than was the case before the causal forces on the left of the figure reached high levels, but does this also mean that these symbols are more significant and that they are more important than material structures? Here, the answer is not so obvious; we need data to be sure.

Has culture become detached from groups in local time and space? There can be little doubt that group symbols do circulate as commodities more than in the past, and so, in this sense, symbols are detached from groups and can move about global markets in ways that disconnect these symbols from the local places and times in which they were developed. But it is another matter to assert that local groups in specific places and times have lost control of their symbols entirely, and it is another empirical question as to whether those symbols that have been circulated as commodities have become free-floating and without meaning and thus almost impossible to reattach to groups in local space and time. Thus we will need more empirical work on how local groups in advanced capitalism develop, use, and protect symbols. The claims of postmodernists may be on the mark, but it is not completely clear if groups have lost meaningful symbols that give social reality an obdurate character.

This moves us to the question of whether cultural symbols have lost their capacity to provide meanings to individuals. Here, it is not certain that postmodernists' claims are correct. It is true that more symbols circulate as commodities, or at least this seems to be the case (and is a testable hypothesis), but it is another matter to postulate that systems of symbols have become so destabilized and dereified that they have lost the ability to provide stable meanings. Again, we need data on samples of societies and social structures in these societies regarding the extent to which symbols provide meanings to individuals. Our guess is that symbols operate as they always have, providing meanings that give individuals a sense of order, but our guess would simply be another hypothesis. At the very least, the claims of postmodern theory on this score cannot be uncritically accepted.

Has there been an increasing emphasis on self and the individual as opposed to groups and collectivities? Have meanings become ever more part of the individual and less the product of group attachments? It is plausible that individualism increases with capitalism and markets, since these transformations give people choice, or at least the sense of increased choice. But it does not follow that individuals are marginal to the many groups to which they belong and that they are incapable of using group symbols to sustain meaningful attachments. Such may be the case, but this issue needs to be examined empirically. Since Durkheim's concerns about "egoism" and Simmel's portrayal of the marginality of modern life, it has been implicitly assumed by many social theorists that individualism can prevent individuals from using the symbols of collectivities for defining and evaluating self. But is this really so? Our guess is that it is not the case, but again this is only a hypothesis that needs to be tested.

Has the subject become inviable, blocking out a complex world, adopting a blasé attitude and becoming emotionally flat, and engaging in hyper-reflexivity to the point of not being able to maintain a stable self? Let us assess each part of the argument. It is very plausible that individuals in particular settings are cognitively overloaded and, as a result, are shutting out many stimuli in their environments. Does it follow, however, that individuals are also emotionally flat and unable to invest in cultural symbols and social structures? Here, the argument is on less certain ground. It may be that this is the case, although we would hypothesize that a "postemotional" society does not exist and that individuals still seem quite capable and desirous of developing attachments to groups and their symbols. Such a hypothesis is testable. Finally, have individuals become highly reflexive to the point of not being able to form stable meanings about themselves? There is, of course, a large literature and debate on whether individuals have a core self and identity, and this argument has raged for many decades. Surprisingly, it has not been easy to test because of the difficulty of measuring self. In principle, the hypothesis proposed by postmodernists is testable, but like the older debate on the nature of self, it may prove difficult to assess empirically. It is, on the surface, plausible that individuals in postmodern conditions are more reflexive for the reasons outlined in postmodern theory, but this need not imply that they do not possess stable self-conceptions or that they are incapable of developing attachments to groups whose symbols are used in self-evaluations.

What, then, can we conclude about postmodern theory? First, it can be translated into formal propositions that can guide the development of empirical hypotheses. Second, when formalized, it is clear that, despite the new vocabulary and epistemology, the concepts and processes found in postmodern theory are also found in the classical modernist tradition. Third, postmodern theory extends this tradition in new and creative ways. Fourth, much of postmodern theory is on firm empirical ground, but many critical lines of argument are less obviously plausible. It is these latter propositions that need to be tested, now and into the future.

#### **NOTE**

1. A number of authors have sought to make postmodernism available to a more general audience. Ritzer (1997) offers an accessible account from the position of a sociological theorist; Cahoone's (1996) anthology is a good guide to the literature of both modernism and postmodernism; Bertens (1995) and Anderson (1998) offer historical readings of the development of the idea of postmodernism; and Allan (1998) and Dunn (1998) offer "groundings" of postmodernism while taking seriously its theoretical claims, Allan grounds postmodern issues through ritual theory and Dunn through the sociology of knowledge and Mead. See also Denzin 1986, 1991; Lemert 1990, 1992, 1994; and Seidman 1992, 1994.

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