

Post modernism to  
sociological  
understanding  
sociology essay



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Important contributions to sociological thinking about postmodernism emerged from several academics, some of whom considered themselves postmodernists and others who did not. This essay will discuss the origins of postmodernism and its views and focus primarily on the works of Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard and poststructuralist Michel Foucault. In addition to this, criticisms of their work and their influences within social theory shall be analysed.

Postmodernism developed as a reaction to the inadequacies of the eighteenth century Enlightenment movement which held views about scientific positivism, the search for absolute truth, ultimate meaning and the nature of reality using rationality. Postmodernists are anti-essentialist and argue that an absolute scientific truth has been discredited as truths are multiple and always changing. The belief is that people no longer rely on science. In support of this, Fulcher & Scott (2003) argue that in 1962, Thomas Kuhn suggested that science creates its facts instead of providing given facts. He argued that scientists collaborated with other researchers who shared particular concepts and methods in common to bring about factual knowledge; Kuhn claims this tells scientists what to find in experiments and help explain observations that do not match their preconceived ideas. This view was developed further by Lyotard, which shall be discussed in more detail (Haralambos & Holborn, 2004). It is argued that the postmodern society is associated with pluralism, difference, uncertainty and cultural relativism as there is a vast choice of interpretations of the world surrounding humans. Moreover, individualism reigns and people find it difficult to form a real identity making them anxious and insecure (Jones et

al. 2011, Giddens 2006, Bilton et al. 2002, Connolly 2013, Boyne & Rattansi, 1990). Therefore, postmodernists stress for the need for local knowledge produced out of particular locations (Macionis & Plummer, 2nd edn).

Jean- Francois Lyotard (1995) stated ' I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences'. This rejection of metanarratives is related to the postmodernist idea that there is no social theory that can provide absolute sociological knowledge. Meta-narratives which are big stories that seek to find the objective truth about society, provided by the likes of Emile Durkheim and Karl Marx who attempt to explain the social world in its entirety have been abandoned, as suggested by Lyotard. This involves scepticism towards the idea of history moving in the direction of progress, freedom and reason (Beyer 1992, Connolly 2013, Ritzer,).

Lyotard uses the concept of ' language- games'. He argues that language is problematic as it does not provide a map for reality. With positivism however, language is considered to be a natural outlet to describe observations but postmodernists reject this notion as there are too many meanings for one word which are in constant flux. Lyotard argues that the Enlightenment brought about scientific denotative games whereby scientific statements are scrutinised by other scientists and rational argument is used to establish whether a statement should be accepted or rejected. The belief is that science can help humans to become more self-conscious. However, Lyotard rejects this view and argues that nowadays statements are judged not by whether they are true or not, but whether they are useful and efficient or not (Connolly 2013, Haralambos & Holborn, 2004).

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On the other hand, Giddens (2006) argues that Jean Baudrillard sees society as characterised by simulations and hyper reality. The creation of simulacra attempt to reproduce reality and hype reality is a description of the social world in which simulations and simulacra become real and predominate. Society is dominated by media, technology and information which have created an empty world. Appignanesi et al. (2004) suggest that Baudrillard argues that this has reversed Marx's theory that economic forces shape society. Instead, society is influenced by a constant flux of meaningless signs and images. Meaning is now created by the flow of images such as in TV programmes, pop music and so forth. Individuals now respond to media images rather than to real people or places. These provide impermanent multiples of reality to consume (Haralambos & Holborn, 2004, Kirby 2000, Agger, 1991 and Giddens 2009). Jones et al. (2011) argue that this breakdown between reality and knowledge is part of people's knowledge in the postmodern world as suggested by Baudrillard. He calls this ' the dissolution of life into TV' (cited in Giddens, 2006: 115). In addition he states, ' TV watches us, TV alienates us, TV manipulates us, and TV informs us (Haralambos & Holborn, 2004, p. 976). Baudrillard is pessimistic about the future and does not believe in socialism as suggested by Marx. He views the masses as being gradually more passive. Thus, life is led toward nihilism (Ritzer, 2008). In contrast, Lyotard is optimistic about these new changes. Unfortunately, Baudrillard's work has been criticised for being highly abstract and relies upon examples to illustrate arguments (Haralambos & Holborn, 2004).

Alternatively, associated with post structuralism is Michel Foucault who incorporated a variety of theoretical insights, particularly from Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche. Like Nietzsche, he was particularly interested in the relationship between power and knowledge. Foucault pays particular attention to the techniques that are developed from scientific knowledge and how they are used by various institutions to exert power over people via surveillance, enforcement and discipline. His work is known as Foucault's archaeology where he sets about making sense of the familiar by looking into the past. He sees history moving from one system of domination based on knowledge to another. He suggests that there is no history but a multiple, overlapping and interactive series of legitimate vs. excluded histories. One example he suggests is that there are increases in the ability of the sane and their agents such as psychologists to oppress and repress the mad, who initially used to be viewed to possess a 'gift' (Ritzer 2008, Marsh et al. 2009, Giddens, 2006, Macionis & Plummer 2002, Jones et al. 2011, Appignanesi et al. 2004). This means that what counts as true, morally right is relative to a particular time, place and power struggle; truth changes according to whoever is powerful enough to define it (Jones et al. 2011). Foucault developed the concept of discourse by drawing upon the work of Claude Levi-Strauss who argued that language originates in the unconscious human mind. Furthermore, culture is also the creation of the same unconscious thought processes. Culture is therefore like language. Thus there is nothing in social life that is a result of the creation of the imaginative mind. Human beings are not the authors of their life stories as these are written for them in language and in culture which exist independently of individuals.

Therefore social reality is defined by structural influences as a system of  
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language external to the actor. This link between thought, language, knowledge and action Foucault summarizes with the phrase ' discursive practises' (Jones et al, 2011).

Fulcher and Scott (2003) argue that Foucault and Lyotard's works are often linked as they both reject the idea that there are constraining structures in social life and recognise fragmentation and diversity in cultural and social life. Foucault's writings have been influential in furthering research into power and knowledge across the social sciences (Ritzer, 2008). His approach to analysing the relationship between truths, meaning and power has shaped the theoretical and research agendas of the social sciences' Jones et al. (2011) (p. 128). Moreover, Agger argued that ' Foucault has made direct empirical contributions to social sciences where he has studied the discourse/practices of prisons (1977) and sexuality (1978). This research supports his argument.

Overall, postmodernism is criticized for being untestable, superficial, fragmented, relativistic, abstract and lacking depth. A consequence of this is that people are unable to make sense of an increasingly complex society. In addition to this, Giddens (1990 cited in Bilton et al. (2002) argues that the postmodernist account of contemporary society is contradictory because Lyotard and Baudrillard's arguments are based on uncertainty. Furthermore, Giddens criticises postmodernist approaches for rejecting the notion that humans are creative agents with an active part in shaping their social worlds. The view that an absolute break with past has occurred, as suggested by Baudrillard, has been solidly rejected by most sociologists, as he was unable to identify the point of separation between modernity and <https://assignbuster.com/post-modernism-to-sociological-understanding-sociology-essay/>

postmodernity or provide a clear account of the move into postmodern society. This inadequacy may have led sceptical sociologists like Giddens (1991) and Beck (1999) to go for terms such as 'late modernity' to describe the social changes representative of contemporary society. Other criticisms by Greg Philo and David Miller suggest postmodernism's inability to account for social causation and the implication of factors such as the economy. Instead, the focus was only on surface portrayals of social change and missing the impact of deep social structures and growing inequalities which should not be ignored within sociology. Moreover, Philo and Miller argue that Baudrillard is said to pretend as though media images have no connection with reality at all. In their research, they found that media audiences are well aware of the difference between reality and TV images. Philo and Miller abandon the postmodern impression that people are free to consume, do as they wish and recreate identities as they please. They believe that people are still very much inhibited and shaped by structures such as the capitalist economy. Postmodernists ignore that culture is shaped by the capitalist economy (Haralambos & Holborn, 2004). Another criticism is brought forward by Jürgen Habermas who rejects the arguments of postmodernism notion that it is impossible to understand the social world rationally (Kirby, 2000).

Nevertheless, the biggest contribution of postmodernism may lie in its methodological approach in denying both the search for absolute truths and an emphasis on finding the foundations of social occurrences. Instead, the postmodern approach suggests that the influence of authority and power need to be analysed in social theory, with the intention of concentrating on the uncovered social conditions of marginalised groups of society (Ritzer,

1997). Additionally, Agger argues that postmodern approaches have been effective critiques of positivism, interrogating taken for granted assumptions about science. However, postmodernism has not produced a concrete version to replace positivist classical theories.

In conclusion, Foucault has shown through his studies how knowledge was historically established through his concept of discourses. Baudrillard's analysis has been suggested to possibly enhance research in the social sciences on culture and the media (Agger, 1991) and Lyotard has shown how science is just one of the many discourses currently in power to control people.