



From Modernity to Postmodernity
Activities and Further Reading
© onlineclassroom.tv 1999

Online Classroom Ltd
PO Box 104
Hinckley
Leicester
LE10 2WW
Registered in England Number 5896648

tel / fax: 0845-505-0664
www.onlineclassroom.tv
enquiries@onlineclassroom.tv

About the Video

This video is designed to support the teaching of sociology and sociological theory in particular. It is a resource designed to supplement classroom teaching, stimulate discussion and illustrate textbook reading.

It is divided into four sections, each of which focuses on a key area in relation to postmodern theory. The end of each section is indicated by a **pause**. There are also some suggestions about questions which can be raised both before and after each section. The sections are as follows:

- **Modernity and Sociology**
- **From Modernity to Postmodernity**
- **Postmodernity and Sociology**
- **Postmodernity and the Enlightenment**

This video deals with sociological ideas that are both newer, and in some respects more complex, than those of our previous videos on *Theory and Method* and *Sociological Theory*. It will need careful guidance from teachers/lecturers. It is not recommended for use with students who are just starting sociology as some prior knowledge of the subject, and particularly sociological theory, is required to begin to make sense of the ideas examined here. We also recommend that the video is shown in separate sections rather than as a whole.

Terminology: although the terms postmodernity and postmodernism are sometimes used interchangeably, as they are in the video, it is important to recognise the distinctions that exist between **key terms** which are defined below. A **glossary** of other conceptual terms is provided at the back.

Postmodernity: a social formation, or social condition, which is distinct from and succeeds modernity

Postmodernisation: the social processes leading from modernity to postmodernity

Postmodernism: a set social and cultural beliefs, values and ways of behaving which result from, or define, living in postmodernity

Postmodern Social Theory: a body of theoretical ideas which have as their focal point a critique of the philosophy of the Enlightenment and its applications in social science

1. *Modernity and Sociology* (9 minutes)

key issues

In order to understand what is meant by postmodernity, it is first necessary to know what sociologists mean by modernity, and to understand that sociology was both an attempt to 'make sense' of modernity and itself a product of a 'modern way of thinking'. Thus this introductory section focuses on the origins of Sociology in the philosophy of the Enlightenment and the transition to modernity. It also outlines how most contemporary sociology is still influenced by the 'modernist' ambitions of understanding how societies (or parts of them) work in order to criticise and perhaps improve them in some way. [*Note:* this section can also be used for the *general* teaching of sociological theory and particularly the origins of sociology in classical theorists' attempts to understand modernity.]

Before watching this section

- Ask students to discuss why they think sociology began in the first place i.e. **why** did people start asking critical questions about societies in the 19th century?
- Sociology is about how societies (or parts of them) work and change. Ask students to discuss (or write down) what they think the point of sociology is e.g. is sociology 'useful'? Should it be 'useful'? If so to whom?
- Both religion and science are forms of knowledge. In what ways are they similar and in what ways different?
- How important is religion as a guide to behaviour and **identity** in contemporary society?

Questions after watching this section

- What is the philosophy of the **Enlightenment** and how is it relevant to Sociology?
- Tony Giddens says in the video " **Modernity** is the world you see all around you" How far do you agree with him?
- What are the three key assumptions made by most sociologists about societies?

2. *From Modernity to Postmodernity* (12 minutes)

key issues

In the previous section postmodernism was described as ‘a challenge’ to sociology. Postmodernists make two key points in this context: first, that contemporary societies have undergone radical social changes in recent years (postmodernisation) and that the condition of modernity is dissolving and second, that ‘conventional’ sociological ideas no longer work and that new (i.e. postmodern) ideas are needed to understand these changes. The aim of this section is to examine the first of these points: the assertion that changes over the last three or four decades have resulted in modernity giving way to a new ‘**postmodern condition**’. It uses mainly lay interviews to compare aspects of living in the 1960s with the present day. Rather than engaging in theoretical discussion at this stage, its aim is primarily to stimulate discussion and provide an idea of what these changes are about.

Before watching this section

- Discuss with students how they perceive their lives are different from those of their parents. The class could be broken up into small groups, each focusing on a particular aspect of life: e.g. work; education; family life; sexuality and so on.
- Ask students if there are any rules for fashion today? Do the clothes people wear tell you anything about their **identity**?

Questions after watching this section

- What is meant by the postmodern condition?
- In the video there is a contrast in the sixties and the nineties generations' view of marriage. What do students think has brought about these changes?
- Divide the class into groups: some have to argue ‘life was much better for most people in the 1960s’, others that it is much better today? [While such value judgements are not of specific sociological relevance, it is a way of getting students to think about the changes taking place in contemporary societies, whether or not they are described as ‘postmodern’. For example, the former group could explore the effects of unemployment, point to the rising incidence of teenage suicide, eating disorders and drug use.]
- The postmodern condition was described as one of ‘**incessant choice**’. How relevant is it that the young people interviewed in the video were living in a western, affluent society and were mostly middle class?

3. *Postmodernity and Sociology* (16 minutes)

key issues

This section is concerned with exploring why and how society may have changed in recent years and considering some of the implications for sociology. It looks at the postmodern idea that as the institutional order of societies has become increasingly fragmented and diverse, the *generalisations* sociologists typically make about social institutions and the *comparisons* they make between different social groups have become increasingly difficult to sustain. It uses the example of the media and gender to illustrate some of these points. [*Note*: this section can also be used to supplement the general teaching of media and gender.]

Before watching this section

- Ask students what they think the implications are for sociology of the much greater **choice** people now have in their personal lives.
- How important is the mass media in students' lives? What effect does this have on their attitudes and behaviour particularly in relation to their sense of **identity**?
- The traditional sociological view is that gender is a **social construction**. Ask the males in the group to comment on how different life would have been for them if they had been born female and vice versa.

Questions after watching this section

- What is the postmodern view of the **media**? How does it differ from other sociological views?
- What is **hyperreality**? To what extent does the media create reality for most people in contemporary society?
- In the video Shaun Best says that **gender** is now 'redundant'. Do you agree with this idea?
- Take a key area of sociological research such as class, family, and ethnicity. Compare the key features of a 'modernist' and 'postmodernist' approach
- Baudrillard says the **image** is more important than the reality. Ask students to watch advertisements on television and make a list of those which can be described as modern (the image shows you the product) and postmodern (the image **signifies** the product).

4. *Postmodernity and the Enlightenment* (7 minutes)

key issues

The video began by looking at sociology's origins in the philosophy of the Enlightenment. The final section returns to these ideas and looks at the postmodern critique of sociology's attempt to provide rational and critical understanding of how societies work. Postmodernists argue that the increasing fluidity and fragmentation of social life also applies to knowledge. The boundaries separating different forms of knowledge are breaking down and there are no longer any clear criteria for determining whether one form of knowledge, one theory, or one piece of research, is any more valid (or 'true'), or even any better, than any other.

Before watching this section

- Do sociologists provide 'special knowledge' of societies? If so how?
- The previous section suggested the key ideas of sociology like class, gender etc are past their sell-by date. What do you think are the implications for sociology?

Questions after watching this section

- The video says that postmodernists argue we are now living in 'a permanent state of virtual reality'. It's not just that media images are becoming more real, it is also that the world we experience is becoming more artificial. For example the brochure for *Centre Parcs* promises 'all the buzz of a foreign holiday but with none of the frustration of flights and ferries'. Ask students to look for similar examples of hyper-reality from Theme Parks, travel brochures, supermarkets and so on.
- In the video Margaret Archer argues that we shouldn't give up on the idea of trying to do something about poverty, oppression, discrimination etc. Shaun Best, in contrast argues that 'people shouldn't be told what to think' Ask students which viewpoint they agree with and why.
- Postmodernists argue that one viewpoint is as good as another. There is, as Keith Sharp says, "no privileged right to claim absolute authority". What are students' views about this?
- Is postmodernism itself a 'grand narrative'?

responses to postmodernism

To try to define postmodernity and postmodernism is, of course, a very unpostmodern thing to do. Unlike say, marxism or feminism, a clear and consistent body of postmodern ideas cannot be identified. It is also difficult to find a clear boundary between 'modern' and 'postmodern' thought. While there are those who identify themselves as 'for' or 'against' postmodernism and postmodern theory, there are positions in between. For students comparatively new to this area, it might be useful to identify several different positions on, or responses to, postmodernity. For example:

1. ***Contemporary societies remain modern:*** Habermas and Callinicos, like many sociologists, have been very critical of postmodern theory. They argue that postmodernists focus only on the trivial, and ignore the underlying structures of power and wealth distribution, which still shape people's lives and opportunities. They accuse postmodernists of being superficial and apolitical.

2. ***Modernity transformed:*** Some writers, like Beck and Giddens for example, argue that while contemporary societies remain essentially modern, developments such as de-industrialisation and the growth of global communications and world markets, have significantly transformed their nature. They use terms like late, or reflexive, modernity to describe this change.

3. ***Sociology of postmodernity:*** Some sociologists, like Bauman and Harvey, accept that contemporary societies have become postmodern, but argue that this does not rule out the possibility of some rational sociological understanding.

4. ***Postmodern sociology:*** Some, like Lyotard and Baudrillard, who are usually described as postmodernists argue that not only are contemporary societies postmodern, but that this postmodern condition effectively rules out the possibility of general sociological theories which claim some expert knowledge of societies. Sociology has to be more modest in its ambitions.

reading on postmodernity

Classical Statements

Lyotard J-F. (1978/trans. 1984) *The Postmodern Condition*, Manchester University Press. Probably *the* most influential text of postmodernism; Lyotard sets out his scepticism of, and hostility to, grand narrative.

Rorty R. (1979) *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton University Press. One of the clearest statements of the philosophical underpinnings of postmodernism where Rorty attempts to justify the view that truths are not discovered but constructed.

Baudrillard J. (1983) *Simulations*, New York, Semiotext. Baudrillard is probably the most 'sociological' of the major figures of postmodern theory. This book provides one of the best insights into his views of the media and hyperreality.

Secondary Overviews

For those with neither the time nor the inclination to read the originals, in our view, the following provide some of the very best secondary sources:

Kumar V. (1995) *From Post-Industrial to Post-Modern Society*, Oxford, Blackwell

Lyon D. (1994) *Postmodernity*, Buckingham, Open University

Hall S. et.al. Eds. *Modernity and Its Futures*, Buckingham, Open University

Responses

For:

Anderson W. ed. (1995) *The Fontana Postmodern Reader*, London, Harper Collins. A selection of extracts, mainly from key texts, which are generally supporting the postmodern position, directly or indirectly.

Against:

Callinicos A. (1989) *Against Postmodernism*, Oxford, Polity. A very readable, and irritated, critique of postmodernism from a marxist position.

From Modernity To Postmodernity

after postmodernism?

Stones R. (1996) *Sociological Reasoning: Towards a Past-Modern Sociology* An interesting and very readable critique of both modernist and postmodern social theory, giving examples from well known sociological studies. Despite the apparent complexity of the subject matter, this is a very clearly written and entertaining text which students with some sociological knowledge should find accessible and helpful.

Owen D. ed. (1997) *Sociology After Postmodernism*, London, Sage. A collection of original essays looking at how a number of key areas of sociological work such as class, gender, crime and deviance and race and ethnicity have been affected by postmodern ideas.

key article

Bryman A. (1999) 'The Disneyization of Society' *The Sociological Review*: 25-45 This article compares postmodern theories of the consumer culture, manifested in the growth of theme park culture, with Ritzer's notion of McDonaldization based on the modernist Weberian notion of the increasing rationalization of life. Although some of the ideas are complex, the idea of looking at Disney and McDonald's as manifestations of much wider social processes provides a good 'way in' to the some of the more general issues.

some more basic articles/texts

Research Roundup What is Postmodernism? *Social Studies Review*, Vol.6 No.1

Strinati D. 'Postmodernism and Popular Culture' *Sociology Review*, Vol.1 No.4

Brown P. 'Modernism, Postmodernism and Sociological Theory' *Sociology Review*, Vol.5 No.2

Chitty C. 'Sociology, the Enlightenment and the Challenge of the Postmodernists' *Sociology Review*, Vol.6 No.4

Manning P. 'Post-Modernism' *Social Science Teacher*, Vol.25 No.3

Manning P. 'Post-Modernism and the Media' *Social Science Teacher*, Vol.25 No.3

Taylor S. 'Postmodernity and Sociology' *S magazine* from Updates, Spring 1999

Appignanesi R. and Garratt C. (1995) *Postmodernism for Beginners*, Cambridge, Icon. A comic strip approach but does explain some points well.

glossary

Section 1. Modernity and Sociology

Modernity: A general descriptive term, which is usually, taken to mean two things. First, it refers to the emergence of modern societies based around things like industrial production, urban living, science, technology, political democracy, rational planning and the growth of the state. Secondly, modernity is characterised by a particular outlook on the world, which sets itself against tradition, superstition and religious interpretations. It celebrates the power of rational understanding, and science in particular, to understand how the world works. As the video makes clear, sociology is closely tied to modernity. Not only did it begin in the nineteenth century as an attempt to understand these 'new' modern societies that were developing in Western Europe, it was itself a product of modernity. That is, the idea of understanding how societies work with a view to improving them is a distinctly modern idea.

Pre-modernity: The social condition preceding modernity based largely on agricultural production and craft industries, rural life, localised personal authority, religious values and traditional action; that is, things were done in certain ways because that was the way they had always been done.

Industrialisation: The development of mechanised technology and large scale productive processes, seen most clearly in the factory system. Industrialisation is a major source of the transformation or pre-modern to modern society. Sociology began as attempt to make sense of industrial society.

Progress: Originally this was an idea, held by many classical sociologists like Marx and Comte, that human societies were not just changing but were moving forward in very specific directions towards higher forms. While few sociologists hold that view so clearly today, most still believe in progress in a more limited sense: that is, that sociology can (and should) be used to reveal aspects of social life that can (and should) be changed for the better.

From Modernity To Postmodernity

Section 2. From Modernity to Postmodernity

Individualism: This refers to processes and beliefs by which the individual and individual rights become increasingly important. Modernity was associated with increasingly individualism and while, most sociologists generally approved of this development, many were also aware of its dangers. For example, Durkheim attributed the rise in suicide rates of developed societies to increasing individualism. The postmodern condition could be characterised as one of super-individualism, where people become increasingly preoccupied with self and self-fulfilment at the expense of obligations to the institutions of wider society.

Uncertainty: The term uncertainty is used in a very specific sense here to refer to processes where people become less certain of who they are or what they should be doing and of the world around them. For some sociologists this arises from the fact that people's **identity** is less clearly defined by a sense of belonging to particular institutions or cultures, a process resulting in what Giddens has described as ontological insecurity.

Section 3: Postmodernity and Sociology

Institutions: In human societies certain forms of conduct and belief, moral codes or religious practices for example, become reproduced by successive generations as accepted and proper ways of doing things. In sociological terms they become social institutions. Thus family, religion, education and government are examples of social institutions. These are organisations which exist over time. Although the people may change the structure continues to exist.

Mass media: the mass media is defined as large-scale organisations which use one or more technologies (newspapers, television, internet etc) to communicate with large numbers of people.

Hyperreality: This really relates to the idea that the world of the media is in some way more real than the reality that it attempts to represent. The distinction between reality and fantasy or reality and fiction has become blurred to such a point that it's almost no longer meaningful to make a distinction between the two. An example of this is would be the fact that people regularly write to soap opera characters as though they were real people with real lives.

Gender: Whether a person is male or female is biologically determined and related to physical characteristics. However, their gender, whether they are masculine or feminine is considered to be socially produced. Children learn gendered behaviour through their culture.

Deconstruction: Deconstruction is a process, which involves looking at a text and trying to identify what are the key elements within that text. Postmodernists use the word text in a very broad sense, so the text can be literally a book, or a text can be gender, or it can be ethnicity.

From Modernity To Postmodernity

Section 4: Postmodernity and the Enlightenment

Grand narratives: This means literally 'big ideas' or 'big stories' about how the world works; world religions and science are examples of grand narratives. In social science the term grand narratives (or grand theories) is applied to general theories (or perspectives) about how societies work and change. For postmodernists, the diversity and fragmentation of the contemporary world does not allow such general theorising.

Aesthetics: This term is used more often in connection with art rather than sociology. It means possessing a awareness of a sense of the beauty of things.

Lyotard: One of the major 'founders' of postmodern theory as it applies to sociology. Lyotard's book *The Postmodern Condition* was an attack on the idea of grand narratives (see above).

