CULTURAL THEORY
An Introduction

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In the area of cultural theory, few concepts have generated as much anxiety and controversy as that of postmodernism. Debate revolves around a series of related terms: postmodernism, postmodernity, postmodernization, and globalization. By the end of this chapter and the next you should have a good grounding in these complex themes. It is helpful to begin here with some basic definitions.

- **Postmodernism** has several dimensions. It refers, first, to an aesthetic and artistic style that rejects the aesthetic and artistic codes of modernism. It also encompasses a philosophical and theoretical position that emerges from poststructuralism and rejects the tenets of modernist thought.

- **Postmodernity** refers to a stage of social development which is thought to be beyond that of modernity. A synonym here is the postmodern era. The key idea is that there has been a decisive and radical shift to a postindustrial economy organized around culture and cultural consumption, the media, and information technology.

- **Postmodernization** refers to the process of social change which drives the transition from modernity to postmodernity.

- **Globalization** is the process by which the world is becoming more and more interconnected, with existing political, cultural, and economic boundaries being superseded. Many discussions of postmodernity involve some discussion of globalization.

A further useful analytical distinction can be made between literatures that advocate or make use of the principles of postmodernism, and those which seek to explain postmodernism and postmodernization. We can distinguish, for example, between “postmodern sociology” and a “sociology of postmodernism.” The former embraces, proselytizes, and applies the perspectives advocated by postmodern theory. The latter takes the postmodern and postmodernization as the objects of analysis. It sets out to trace their characteristics and explain their emergence — often using conventional modernist social and cultural theories. In this chapter we are concerned with this second literature. In line with the theme of this book, our primary aim is to identify the codes of postmodern cultural production and to introduce theories and critiques of cultural shifts toward a postmodern society. In chapter 14 we look in more detail at postmodernism as a theoretical or philosophical stance.

Before going any further we need to put some content into the empty box of “the postmodern.” Perhaps the quickest way to do this is to list some of the qualities of postmodern culture and postmodern society on which everyone seems to agree, regardless of their particular explanations and discussions (see, for example, Bauman 1992, Frow 1998, Hebdige 1986, Lash 1990a).

- Culture and the mass media have become more powerful and important in social life than previously.
- Economic and social life revolve around the consumption of symbols and lifestyles, rather than the production of goods through industrial labor.
- Ideas about reality and its representation are made problematic.
- Image and space have replaced narrative and history as organizing principles of cultural production.
- Stylistic features like parody, pastiche, irony, and pop eclecticism become more prevalent.
- A consumption-based cityscape dominates urban form. Rather than being organized around economic production, this has as its central dynamic the provision of entertainment, leisure, and lifestyle services. Shopping malls, pleasure parks, and themed residential complexes are examples of this.
- Hybridity comes to replace rigid boundaries and classifications.

In the course of this chapter we will encounter various theories and discussions of these diverse and sometimes puzzling phenomena.

### Postmodernism in Architecture

The field in which the concept of the postmodern first came to be firmly established was that of architecture. As debates about architecture have long held a central place in discussions on postmodernism among cultural
Jencks suggests that the failure of the scheme is emblematic of wider problems with modernism in architecture. The Pruitt–Igoe scheme had been designed according to principles of "rationalism, behaviorism and pragmatism" (1977: 10), but had not provided a safe or enjoyable place to live. Jencks suggests that modern architecture has several key characteristics.

- **Form tends to be univocal.** There is an emphasis on the monumental and repetitive use of a few materials and shapes. This is exemplified in the "international style": the glass and steel skyscrapers of Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier, with their towering, anonymous, curtain-wall façades.
- **Buildings are constructed according to the metaphor of the industrial machine.** They are serious buildings that signify things like power and rationalism. Form and design are subservient to function.
- **Designers had utopian ideas.** Influenced by artistic, political, and philosophical doctrines, they believed that architecture could play a heroic role as part of a wider project of social and moral engineering.

According to Jencks, the eventual failure of modernist architecture, symbolized by the demise of the Pruitt–Igoe development, has much to do with these characteristics. The design never responded to human needs for environmental diversity and community formation. It also failed to connect with symbolic needs. He asserts that most people found the metaphors of modern architecture (e.g., building as "machine" or "factory") rather alienating.

A broadly similar point is made by the star architect Robert Venturi and his collaborators in the influential text Learning from Las Vegas (1977 [1972]). Their claim is that architects need to be "more understanding and less authoritarian" in orientation. Venturi turned to the casinos, hotels, and strip malls of Las Vegas for lessons. Although these had traditionally been condemned as populist and ugly, he argues that such evocative distinctions should be inverted. To the contrary, he asserts that the architecture of Las Vegas is vibrant, anti- elitist, and communicates effectively to ordinary people. One reason for this was that ornament (e.g., billboards) was a key feature of design. In contrast to this is a modern architecture which is obsessed with "space, structure and program . . . a dry expressionism, empty and boring" (1977: 103). Here ornament is neglected and the building symbolizes through a code that only experts can read.

What, then, is postmodern architecture? The core elements of this style can be derived from the writings of Jencks (1977), Venturi et al. (1977), and the critic Fredric Jameson (1984: who we discuss below). There is:

- **An emphasis on playful rather than serious design.** The casinos of Las Vegas, for example, are buildings which are fun to look at rather than grandiose social statements.
- **"Radical eclecticism,""the "hybrid," and "ad hocism" (Jencks 1977: 87, 92) are to replace monumental uniformity. This might involve the use of multiple styles simultaneously, perhaps mixing and matching themes from different eras. For example, we might find a fake Tudor mansion with a Greek temple-style front porch.
- **Buildings that copy other styles and engage in an ironic pastiche rather than attempting to have a personal stylistic signature.** Again the Las Vegas casinos, which amusingly mimic New York, Ancient Egypt, and so on, provide a nice example of this.
- **Fragmentation of design, with parts of the building operating in aesthetic and functional isolation from each other, each with their own style and micro-environment.**
- **An effort to create buildings which appeal to ordinary people, with semiotic codes that they can understand and enjoy.** Jencks writes that buildings should be "sensual, humorous, surprising and coded as a readable text" (1977: 101).
- **The use of curves and blind alleys rather than rectangles and straight lines.** As a result such buildings can be confusing to navigate.

These characteristics, it should be noted, are broadly consistent with themes in postmodern social theory that we discuss in the next chapter. These include the critique of rationality and expert authority, the decline of grand narratives and the triumph of play and the local.

**Postmodernism in Art and Literature**

Similar developments have taken place in the fields of art and literature, where postmodernists have pitched themselves against what they see as the ills of modernism. The aesthetic codes of modernism, for the most part, favored work that was deeply serious, internally consistent, innovative, abstruse, abstract, and authored by an individual "genius." To a lesser extent it has also celebrated reason, order, and knowledge and carried with
it some kind of message or commentary that it thought to be important about the world. Figures who have been associated with modernism and whose work embodies these traits include:

- Composers like Schoenberg, Berg, Stravinsky, and Webern.
- Artists like Picasso, Matisse, Klee, Mondrian, and Pollack.
- Writers like Joyce, Beckett, Pound, and Eliot.

Postmodern work in these fields is, for the most part, driven by a different aesthetic. Borrowings, to celebrate the irrational and (sometimes) to be readily accessible for interpretation without expert knowledge. There is often no clear moral or message in the work. Such creative products are often ironic in tone, mocking and challenging established aesthetic practices and concepts (e.g., authorship, the value of the arts). Postmodern work can also frequently challenge the boundaries between high and low culture, suggesting not so much that the latter is valid as form of expression, but rather that the distinction itself is no longer useful or viable. In fields like literature and cinema, we will often find a refusal of the traditional sequential plot and the clear moral message. We might find a jumbled story line in place of a grand narrative and high levels of intertextuality (when one film or book refers to or borrows from another) which challenge the idea of a bounded artistic creation with an omnipotent author.

**Postmodernity in Social Theory**

Discussion of postmodernity in social theory began with the work of the French philosophers Lyotard and Baudrillard. Both are difficult to read, and like many theorists, make extreme claims but present limited supporting evidence. Later ideas about postmodernity were taken over by middle-range theorists who attempted to make them relevant to their particular disciplinary concerns.

Jean-François Lyotard

Intellectual debates about postmodernism often find a point of departure in the writings of the French social philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (1984 [1979]). According to Lyotard, societies are organized not just around technologies but also around language games and discourses. He drew particular attention to the role of narratives in social life. In non-industrial societies, myths and stories had a religious quality and assisted in the reproduction of the social order. With the coming of the Enlightenment and the rise of science, technology, complex administrative systems, and computers have become developed to a stage where "knowledge has become the principle force of production over the last few decades" (1984: 5). This shift has had a qualitative as well as quantitative dimension. The utopian, visionary, humanistic discourses that once animated social life have lost their authority. Lyotard calls this the *decline of grand narratives*. He writes that "the grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation" (1984: 37). Most people no longer believe that science, reason, or "truth" will provide answers to social problems or allow us to build a better world. Nor do they think that we can locate a single theory or worldview that can successfully unify all knowledge and experience (e.g., Marxism). Moreover, nobody imagines that we can find a "God’s-eye" place from which to construct knowledge that is true or universally valid. As a result knowledge (and society) fragments into local and multiple fields, with grand humanistic visions falling by the wayside. Lyotard writes that:

The social bond is linguistic, but it is not woven with a single thread... nobody speaks all those languages, they have no universal metalanguage... the goal of emancipation has nothing to do with science, we are all stuck in the positivism of this or that discipline of learning, the learned scholars have turned into scientists, the diminished tasks of research have become compartmentalized and no one can master them all. (1984: 40-1)

To sum up, there has been a loss of certainty and "big-picture" vision, with a positivistic and instrumental production of knowledge coming into place. The loss of grand narratives will lead to a technocratic society where a narrow means-ends rationality comes to dominate social life. Without grand narratives to steer social life, there are no goals to strive for and so instrumental reason takes over. Seen from one perspective, Lyotard is writing in the spirit of Weber and the Frankfurt School (see pp. 15, 42-7). His major innovation, perhaps, is in theorizing the role of narrative and the linguistic in the process of rationalization. It is also important to note that he placed a major emphasis on the shift to a "postmodern," post-industrial society rather than the move from tradition to industrial modernity that had interested earlier scholars.
Like Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard was a major early influence on the development of theory about the postmodern. As long ago as the late 1960s, Baudrillard (1998 [1970]) was arguing that we lived in an era where society is no longer based on the exchange of material goods with use values (à la Marxism). Rather, he suggests, it involves commodities as signs and symbols which have entirely arbitrary and conventional significance within what he calls "the code." The idea of "the code" draws on Levi-Straussian notions of culture as a collective grammar of signifiers. For Baudrillard, our consumer society is one in which people seek to affirm their identity and difference, and experience pleasure through the purchase and consumption of a shared system of signs. He writes: "consumption is an order of significations. like language or like the kinship system in primitive society. . . . The circulation, purchase, sale, appropriation of differentiated goods and signs/objects today constitute our language, our code, the code by which the entire society communicates and converses" (Baudrillard 1998: 79–80).

Baudrillard goes on to suggest that "the code" has become dominant to such an extent that we have to question some of the most basic distinctions that have informed social and cultural thinking. According to him, distinctions between "culture" and "reality" and between the "sign" and that which is symbolized no longer make sense. In the past he suggests, signs and symbols masked some underlying reality or provided a gloss or commentary upon it. Now, however, "a neo-reality has everywhere been substituted for reality, a neo-reality entirely produced by combining elements of the code" (1998: 126). Baudrillard suggests that events in the "real" world are increasingly material expressions of models and mythologies that have originated in an autonomous cultural sphere. The terms he uses to capture this strange dynamic are those of simulation and the simulacrum. Examples of these that have been provided by various researchers include:

- Theme parks like Disney World. These are major economic enterprises, yet they are based upon a fantasy world of cartoon characters, movies, and simplified models of history.
- Themed housing developments which originate on the architect's drawing board and replicate mythologized versions of the past. They might try to copy Olde English villages, Mediterranean fishing ports, and so on.
- Television programs and media events which end up intervening in real life. The 1991 Gulf War, for example, was a conflict in which both sides derived information from television coverage and adjusted their war policies to make them television-friendly. Documentary programs which track the lives of ordinary people, but end up changing those lives, are another example of this process. In both these cases the situation being reported is a situation that is generated by the media itself.
- "Primitive" tribes in Third World tourist destinations whose living conditions, dress, and activities are carefully styled so that they remain "primitive" and so live up to tourist expectations.

Aside from pointing to consumerism and the media, Baudrillard places special emphasis on the work of planners and computer simulations in helping to generate the world in which we live. This perspective possibly reflects his experiences in the technocratic France of the 1960s. Baudrillard tends to be rather fatalistic and nihilistic about the impact of the changes he observes. He sees them as challenging to human agency and speaks of the "death of the social" and "implosions." According to Baudrillard we have witnessed the end of "the social" (genuine, authentic ties between people and associated rational action), as social life becomes caught up in a giant black hole of hypersimulation. Henceforward we are doomed to experience each other only as players in a field of signs, and to passively experience spectaculars and simulacra that reflect upon each other.

In his earlier works, Baudrillard made connections to existing cultural theory and wrote in an academic genre. In some of his later works, such as America and Cool Memories, Baudrillard (1989, 1990) adopts a journalistic, aphoristic, ironic, confrontational, and fragmentary style. He seems to give up on "serious" analysis and instead present sketches and glimpses of contemporary life. As Bryan Turner (1991: 85) points out, this style "simulates the condition it wishes to convey rather than producing a critical style in opposition to postmodern culture." In contrast to his earlier works, these later writings have been read by some (e.g., Callinicos 1989, see below) as an uncritical celebration of the postmodern which is in need of a reality check.

**Daniel Bell**

Postmodern ideas about growing power of knowledge and culture in contemporary society were decisively prefigured in the works of Daniel Bell, written in the 1960s and early 1970s (Turner 1993: 78ff.). Today he is increasingly being seen as a theorist of postmodernity avant la lettre. While Bell is clearly modernist in sensibility and theoretical style, his works such as The Coming of Post-Industrial Society (1973) and The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism (1976) document the decisive shift from an industrial
modernity to one based on information. In these works Bell suggests that in the second half of the twentieth century the continued growth of capitalism depended on information technology and knowledge created in major research centers like universities and hi-tech corporations. At the same time citizens were being converted into consumers with ever-expanding demands for goods and entertainment. Bell suggests that a contradiction exists between culturally driven, hedonistic demands for consumer goods, and the sober needs of the state and the economy. While the latter were still driven by an ascetic rationality that derived from the Protestant ethic (see pp. 14–15), the consumer demanded pleasure and instant gratification. The net picture was of culture becoming unchained. It had become more autonomous and more powerful in driving both demand (consumerism) and production (knowledge, technology).

The neo-Marxist critique of postmodernism

In theorizing the postmodern the early running was made by French theorists. During the 1980s the Anglophone nations began to catch up. Perhaps the most significant development of that era was a wave of neo-Marxist cultural commentary. This was:

- Broadly hostile to the aesthetic codes of postmodernism.
- Keen to demonstrate how the forces of capitalism were at the heart of contemporary cultural shifts.
- Concerned to document the relationship between these shifts and the possibilities for human emancipation.

Frederic Jameson - Postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism

One of the earliest and most influential accounts of postmodernism was an article published in 1984 in the New Left Review by the leading literary critic Frederic Jameson. The essay provides an important starting point for all those interested in the aesthetics of the postmodern and their links to capitalist development. Jameson sees postmodernism and capitalism to be so intimately linked that: “every position on postmodernism in culture...is at one and the same time, and necessarily, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today” (1984: 55).

Jameson’s essay features a seminal discussion of the Bonaventure Hotel in downtown Los Angeles. The outside of the building is broadly modernist, consisting of reflecting glass towers. The interior, by contrast, is strongly postmodern in terms of its spatial configuration. The entrances and exits are hard to find, there are staircases and corridors leading nowhere, and there is no central space, such as a foyer or lobby. The space, in short, is fragmented and “decentered.” Jameson claims that such transformations of space are a mutation that has arisen along with postmodernism. Such new spatial arrangements have also replaced “history” as an organizing principle of society. Jameson sees this as a negative move because he considers having a sense of history is central to developing a genuine understanding of who we are. These new spaces are also dangerous in that they defy our abilities to navigate them and thereby overwhelm our cognitive faculties. They deny us the ability to become active, autonomous, critical agents in charge of our own destinies, as “we do not yet possess the perceptual equipment to match this hyperspace” (1984: 80). Such dystopian aspects of the building are also reflected in a design which turns inward upon itself. Unlike modernist architecture, it refuses contact with the city (remember those hard-to-find entrances and exits), and makes no claim to fulfill any wider civic responsibilities. Rather it sets itself up as a fully self-contained hyperspace—a new, confusing, form of space which is cut off from society. Jameson sees these negative characteristics as inherent not only to postmodern architecture, but also to other postmodern cultural products.

This thematic is further illustrated in his discussion of art. Jameson compares a picture of peasant clogs by Van Gogh with an Andy Warhol screen print. The former (modernist) picture shows a pair of dirty wooden clogs. According to Jameson, we can connect these with a coherent interpretation and a depth hermeneutic. They can be read as symbols of the hardships of an authentic peasant life. Warhol’s picture, by contrast, is a screen print showing a jumble of various high-heeled shoes. Such a postmodern work refuses any stable interpretation. It might be read as a celebration of consumerism, or as its critique. Perhaps it reveals the artist’s own fetishistic tendencies. Or maybe it is an ironic parody upon them. The work of art seems to exist only as a playful series of surfaces and to lack any clear moral vision, narrative, or framework through which we can interpret it. Instead it exhibits “a new kind of flatness or depthlessness” (1984: 60). For all their entertainment value, postmodern works like Warhol’s “Diamond Dust Shoes” fail to generate powerful and authentic emotions. Jameson speaks of this as the waning of affect—an understanding which draws on Benjamin’s thinking about post-auratic cultural production (see p. 43).

In explaining the rise of artistic postmodernism Jameson makes use of a neo-Marxist framework. He suggests that we have entered a phase of late capitalism characterized by the relentless circulation of signs and symbols
and global information flows. The hedonistic consumption of images is central to this stage of capitalism. Postmodernism reflects the new image-based economy in that it is the “cultural logic of late capitalism.” It also operates in ideological ways to prevent people from connecting with their history and collective identity. It generates confusion and celebrates the superficial. In order to combat postmodernism he suggests we need to come to terms with its new spatial logic and develop critical tools for reading postmodern cultural artifacts.

DAVID HARVEY AND FLEXIBLE ACCUMULATION

The geographer David Harvey (1989) provides another neo-Marxian take on postmodernism. Like Jameson, Harvey hangs his analysis on a periodization of phases in capitalist development. For much of the twentieth century, we were in an era of Fordism. Named after automobile manufacturer Henry Ford, the concept refers to the industrial mass production of standardized goods. In Ford's case his automated assembly-line production system churned out millions of identical cars, most notably the famous Model “T” Ford. Harvey suggests that we have now entered an era with a different logic of production. This was a response to a crisis in capitalism that emerged during the early 1970s. Markets were saturated with goods, tax revenues were down, and inflation was out of control. Capitalists responded with a system Harvey calls flexible accumulation. This term is broadly analogous to the concept of post-Fordism used by other scholars. The key to flexible accumulation is an ability to rapidly change product lines and to manufacture small batches for niche markets. In order to do this, manufacturers make use of smaller numbers of adaptable multi-skilled workers, information technology, and computerized production systems. They also deploy advertising and other strategies in order to continually generate shifts in demand for new and trendy products. By incessantly changing product lines, and by encouraging fads and fashions, the wheels of consumerism and capitalism are kept turning. This helps to postpone what Harvey predicts will be an eventual meltdown of the capitalist system.

Consistent with a Marxist logic, Harvey sees these capital-driven trends spilling over into wider cultural life and determining its broad contours. We live in a world where the media, fads, fashions, and images are increasingly important. The result is a culture characterized by superficiality in which products relentlessly replace each other and where the pursuit of empty style has replaced the search for authenticity, history, and narrative.

SCOTT LASH — POSTMODERNISM AS DE-DIFFERENTIATION

Scott Lash is broadly sympathetic to Marxist understandings of postmodernism, interpreting it as a product of the capitalist phase he had earlier designated as “disorganized capitalism.” However, his work is rather eclectic and also draws upon Weber and Durkheim as well as Marx. Making use of their contributions to classical sociological theory, Lash points out that the rise of modernity was associated with a process of differentiation. This was all about the separation of spheres of social life from one another. As he puts it: “Modernization is a process of cultural differentiation, in which (1) the cultural differentiates from the social, and (2) cultural forms which were previously rather indistinct differentiate from one another’ (Lash 1990b: 153). Examples of this process include the separation of religious and secular art, or the distinction between the arts and the sciences. Lash claims that postmodernism is a critique of modernity which is all about de-differentiation. For example:

- Boundaries between culture, economy, and politics are collapsing.
- Within the cultural sphere itself, Kantian distinctions between the aesthetic and the moral are also being problematized.
- Distinctions between high and low culture are becoming harder to make.
- Academic disciplines are no longer distinct from one another.

The concept of de-differentiation is Lash’s most novel idea. Other parts of his work provide extended discussions of themes we have already encountered elsewhere. Key claims include:

- We are living in a world where signs and spaces are increasingly shaping our lives (Lash and Urry 1993). or in a “semiotic society” (Lash 1990b).
- Postmodern artworks are post-auratic in Benjamin’s sense (see p. 43). and issues of authorship are made problematic.
- The idea of “reality” is under attack.
- Images and spectacles are replacing narratives and history as core features of cultural life. It is a “visual rather than a literary sensibility” (Lash 1988: 314).

Where Lash differs from Harvey, Jameson, and most other neo-Marxist critics is in suggesting that postmodernism has a critical and emancipatory potential. Rather than denouncing postmodernism, he suggests that as future struggles are going to be fought out on this “cultural terrain” the critical project has to come to terms with it.
In order to do this he identifies two distinct kinds of postmodernism—“spectral” and “organic” (Lash 1990b). The former corresponds to conventional understandings of the postmodern. It is about play, the simulacrum, individualist consumerism, and superficiality. The latter is linked to the rise of new social movements (women, greens, gays, etc.) and is based on reflexivity, the search for meaning, and collectivism in the face of advanced capitalist society. Lash argues only organic postmodernism is capable of engendering an oppositional politics. He sees hope in the fact that class shifts in contemporary capitalism have provided a large potential audience for this form of postmodernism—including intellectuals, academics, and those who work in the information economy. Furthermore Lash (e.g., 1988) embraces the idea that postmodernism can support tolerance and difference. Drawing on postmodern “gender-bending” advertisements, he suggests that postmodernism has worked to destabilize identities and generate ambivalence. Space has thus been opened up for exciting new subject positions that challenge the normative orders imposed by modernist cultural values.

Further Critiques and Debates

The neo-Marxist critique of postmodernism and postmodernization represents perhaps the most important line of attack. There is also an endlessly proliferating, non-partisan literature which has relentlessly subjected these concepts to scrutiny. This tends to circle around three main themes: the timing, definition, and scope of the transition to postmodernity.

PROBLEMS OF TIMING

Implicit in the concept of “postmodernism” is the idea that it somehow comes after modernism. Yet when we look closely at various domains, we see that artistic modernism reached a high-water mark at divergent points (see Calhoun 1995: 106, Frow 1998: 40).

- In literature we think of the work of writers like T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf, and work that reached a peak of innovation in the 1920s and 1930s.
- In architecture, as we have seen, the focus is on the International Style, which arose in the 1920s and continued strongly until the 1970s.
- In music the paradigm of modernity is associated with the Vienna School. This arose around Schoenberg in the early 1900s but was already being challenged by the “postmodern” work of John Cage and others in the 1940s.

Our understanding of the arrival of the postmodern will vary according to which of these fields we privilege. Looking to social rather than artistic transformations does not help. Either Harvey (1989), for example, dates the shift to the postmodern to the oil crisis of the early 1970s. Yet his fellow Marxist Jameson draws on Ernest Mandel’s model of stages of capitalist development and points to the early 1960s.

Compounding this uncertainty yet further is the fact that for many authors, the postmodern is simply an extension or logical progression of the modern. This means it is possible to trace intimations of postmodernity back several centuries. We can point, for example, to the rise of commodity fetishism and the narcissistic isolated individual in the nineteenth century (see Callinicos 1989: 149), or to the predominance of supposedly postmodern features (irony, play, etc.) in the aesthetic systems of the seventeenth-century baroque (Turner 1990). Such forerunners of the present threaten the idea of a radical break, or even the validity at any attempt at periodization. Craig Calhoun (1995) likewise dubs postmodernism a kind of “pseudohistory” and suggests that “the positing of an epochal change is problematic” (1995: 103). In his reading, theorists of postmodernity often work with simplistic caricatures of artistic modernism, ignoring its complexity and the existence of anti-modern trends in earlier thought.

PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION

Problems of definition are closely related to those of periodization. Even supporters of postmodernism agree that there are multiple understandings. Bauman (1992: vii), for example, points out that “postmodernism means many different things to many different people.” He goes on to suggest that for some it means an architectural style, for others the blurring of reality and television, for yet others consumerism and a proliferation of choice, while for philosophers it refers to a radical, skeptical state of mind. Bauman makes a virtue of a necessity by claiming that “incoherence is the most distinctive among the attributes of postmodernity” (1992: xxiv). He argues that it helps to prevent the emergence of a false, totalizing vision and encourages the proliferation of partial observations and narratives. We discuss these sorts of themes further in chapter 14.

While advocates like Bauman see multiplicity and contradiction as a sign of vitality, critics suggest it merely indicates confusion. A representative attack in this vein has been by John Frow (1998), who claims that “post-
modernism” has no clear meaning. Most efforts at definition, he argues, seem to be in academic essays like his own. These set out to find a post-hoc meaning for concepts that they have found themselves using. He suggests that the term “postmodernism” has proven to be productive simply because of the binarisms implicit within it. These mark it out as being different from, and after, modernism. Therefore endless academic books and papers come into being which work within and fill out these preexisting parameters. This discourse works in the following way: “First you assume the existence of a historical shift in sensibility, which you call the postmodern, then you define it by opposition to whatever you take the modern to have been, finally, you seek to give a content to the postmodern in terms of this opposition” (1998: 15). Frow claims that a lack of clear thinking is manifested in the disconnected lists of things postmodern (the movie Blade Runner, the O.J. Simpson trial, Disneyland, irony, MTV, the simulacrum, and so on) that authors inevitably provide in place of a clear and concise definition. Thanks to the lack of conceptual precision, authors debating in the field often talk past one another in a pointless form of “shadowboxing” (1998: 27).

PROBLEMS OF EXTENT

The issue in hand here concerns the scale and scope of social change. Critics suggest that arguments that we are living in an entirely new social and cultural order are exaggerated and tend toward hyperbole. Craig Calhoun argues that much of the literature presents little or no evidence for extravagant claims that the industrial economy has become less important or that we have entered a post-materialist information age. At best, he suggests, authors like Harvey have documented a “shift – not the first – in the internal organization of capitalism” (1995: 113). Likewise, Alex Callinicos acknowledges that there has been a decline in industrial labor, but goes on to argue that: “The fact that fewer people are employed in material production does not in any case alter the fact that no one can survive without the industrial goods manufactured by these people… rising living standards and the associated expansion of mass consumption entail a proliferation of material goods” (1989: 127).

He further points out that arguments about the rise of post-Fordist production (which we have seen are often linked to sociological accounts of postmodernization) neglect continuing demand for standardized products (e.g., white goods) which do not have to be tailored to a specific lifestyle niche in order to be marketable. The culture written about by postmodernists is one that is celebrates cosmopolitanism, diversity, and consumption. Jean-François Lyotard epitomizes this view when he writes: “Eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture: one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald’s food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and ‘retro’ clothes in Hong Kong” (1984: 76). Alex Callinicos (1989: 162) suggests such arguments gloss over questions of access, pointing out: “it is a bit rich that Lyotard should ignore the majority of the population even in the advanced economies to whom such delights as French scent and Far Eastern travel are denied.” However Lash (1990b), as we have seen, suggests that postmodernism has indeed reached the working classes as a form of superficial consumerism of precisely this type.

In response to these kind of criticisms and debates, those who suggest change has taken place tend to be rather more cautious now than in the past. Steven Seidman (1994: 1), for example, concedes that “the chief signs of modernity have not disappeared” and that things like the industrial economy, professions, trade unions, political parties, state regulation and utopian visions of the public good remain important. He goes on to suggest that we think of the “modern” and “postmodern” as analytical abstractions that can be used to highlight current social trends and sensibilities. For Seidman, whilst the postmodern is gaining in importance, we need to be sensitive to the fact that it is by no means dominant in all spheres.

Globalization and Culture

In order to round off this chapter we need to finish with a small detour into the literature on globalization. This is because discussions about postmodernity often overlap closely with those about this process. A major reason for this is the social forces associated with the postmodernization of culture (e.g., the media, consumerism, tourism, the transnational corporation) have also played a core role in generating a world that is more and more interconnected. By bringing cultures into contact globalization has also encouraged recognition of relativism, reflexivity, difference, and the critique of western modernity. As we will see in chapter 14, these are all key aspects of postmodern theory.

Globalization can be thought of as a process involving three key dimensions (Waters 1995). These are as follows:

- Economic globalization is associated with the rise of world finance markets and free-trade zones, the global exchange of goods and services, and the rapid growth of transnational corporations.
- Political globalization is about the way that the nation-state is being superseded by international organizations (e.g., the United Nations, the European Union) and the rise of global politics.
While discussion of globalization took off in social science during the 1980s, it is important to remember that the process has been going on for millennia. The movement from small-scale hunting and gathering societies toward the modernist nation state, for example, can be seen as a step toward a global society. For this reason much orthodox social and cultural theory can be understood as relating to the issue. The theories of Durkheim, Marx, and Weber provide diverse accounts of the ways that forms of social organization extending over ever larger regions of time and space followed one another during the broader span of history. Notwithstanding the fact that we can reconstruct past theoretical traditions in this way (see Waters 1995), most attention in research on globalization is focussed on contemporary settings. In the field of cultural globalization, in particular, themes relating to capitalism, commodities, time/space distanciation, and information flows lead to an inevitable convergence between the globalization, postmodernization, and postmodernism literatures.

Mike Featherstone argues that much writing on the cultural impact of globalization centers around two contending hypotheses or models (Featherstone 1995: 6). The first model suggests that we are living in a world characterized by increasing homogenization.

• Cultural globalization is about the flow of information, signs, and symbols around the world and reactions to that flow.

While these terms are often used, their exact meaning is elusive and most discussions set about problematizing the binary distinction rather than its explication. Broadly speaking, "the global" refers to the spatially extensive social and cultural forces associated with globalization (e.g., consumerism, satellite communications, culture industries, migration), while "the local" refers to small-scale, geographically confined traditions and ways of life (e.g., ethnic traditions, language, religion). Scholars in this area generally point to the way that processes of globalization have seen global and local cultural preferences and administrative systems. These are tied to a generic, rootless, and ever-expanding capitalist rationality, and its associated commodities and technologies, rather than to a distinctively "American" value system.

Perhaps the best-known theory in this tradition is George Ritzer's (1996) concept of McDonaldization, which draws on the work of Marx and Weber. The idea here is that the principles of fast-food organizations are "engulfing more and more sectors of society and areas of the world" (1996: 16). These principles can be summed up as efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. Ritzer points to sites like universities, funerals, tract housing development, and motels as current areas of McDonaldizing activity. While he sees some benefits in terms of service delivery and affordability, there is also a downside. The practical consequences of change include a narrow means–end rationality without any vision of larger social goals.
Over recent years, scholars have tended to increasingly focus on the last issue of difference and suggest that it has perhaps been the major outcome of cultural globalization (see Featherstone 1995: 12ff.). Postcolonial scholars in particular have suggested that the process has opened up space for the periphery to have a voice, with the monolithic power and authority of the center subject to question from multiple competing centers. The image here is of an endlessly proliferating babble of voices, with established hierarchies and points of reference destabilized and with affirmations of difference providing the only common ground. In this context Western cultural values are relativized as just another form of the local that has been brought into contact with others through globalization.

Suggested Further Reading
I am not aware of any textbooks or readers that provide a focused and balanced discussion of all the themes we have considered here. Thankfully, several of the studies referred to in this chapter are difficult but not impenetrable. Fredric Jameson’s (1984) essay is a classic which should be read. Lash’s (1990a) anthology covers many of the core themes in the literature and will provide a sense of the issues at stake. A study of Jencks (1977) will also help the reader develop a feel for what is going on. Although they are not pitched at textbook level, I can also recommend two insightful books by Krishnan Kumar (1995) and Bryan Turner (1994) to readers looking for a sociological take on postmodernity.

Chapter Fourteen
Postmodern and Poststructural Critical Theory

In the previous chapter we looked at work that explored aesthetic postmodernism and the alleged transition to a postmodern era. Here we are concerned with a literature that advocates a postmodern and poststructural philosophical and analytic position. This has recently become a major force in contemporary cultural theory and has taken over from Marxism as the dominant voice of the Left. We are concerned here, of course, with a massive field full of complex and overlapping intellectual positions. However, the chapter paints with a broad brush, and so exegesis will center not so much on itemizing differences and internal debates as on detecting the essential family resemblances which run through this style of work. This includes the following characteristics:

- The critique of the cultural foundations of science and Western modernity.
- A commitment to the centrality of texts and discourses in the construction of social order.
- A belief that cultural theory is part of a moral and political enterprise.
- A recognition of the perspectives, voices, and cultures of subordinate groups.

The following discussion will explore these themes.

The Critique of Modernity

In the previous chapter we saw how writing on postmodernization was concerned with documenting a historical shift from a modern to a post-