

‘Modernist’ Sociology in a ‘Postmodern’ World?

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Abstract

This article looks at the problems Sociology has in theorising modern discourses in the light of the rise and consolidation of Postmodernism. The paper begins with an historical sketch of the emergence of Enlightenment and how its values helped to engender intellectual curiosity amongst the precursors of modernist sociological theorising. Indeed, the paper analyses how Sociology faces up to enlightenment thought and legacy via a critical analysis of the modern-postmodern debate: its historiography, pathologies, and futurology. At the same time, there has been a huge escalation of neo-Nietzschean theorists under the label of ‘postmodernist’ who have castigated the enlightenment to the dustbin of the history of ideas, that its metanarratives of ‘progress’ and ‘freedom’ have failed and that western rationality is exhausted (Lyotard, 1984). Subsequently, the paper assesses to what extent the values of the ‘project of modernity’ have to be abandoned, and whether, in turn, sociology can offer the epistemic stretching of postmodern narratives.

Introduction

The ‘modern’ world that originated in the West was ultimately the product of the “twin revolutions” of the late eighteenth century, the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution (Thompson, 1992). According to Powell (2005) the emergence of ‘modernity’ can be characterised by a huge rise in trade and industry causing major shifts in the lifestyles of Western civilisation as well as new political, economic and legal structures. The Enlightenment was a time of much new intellectual thought and philosophy which was argued to be ‘rational, equitable, based on natural law and scientific principles’ (Hamilton, 1992: 48). Henri de Saint-Simon and August Comte wanted a ‘science of society capable of both explaining its past and predicting its future’ (Hamilton, 1992: 53). ‘Modernist’ sociology asserted the idea that true facts about nature and society were out there to be discovered. By uncovering such ‘laws’ through objective, progressive research it was thought that we could discover a superior form of knowledge to that of mythical ideologies (McLennan, 1992: 332). The master narrative of ‘progress’ became the new ‘God’, ‘rational’ replaced ‘irrational’ and truth became the new ‘mission’. In modernity the ultimate goals of progress and the mastery of nature became assumed and unquestioned just as God had gone unquestioned in faith (Bauman, 1992: xiv). Bauman claims that a distinguishing characteristic of modernity was the search for a structured world

were 'nature' is taken into hand through the imposition of a man-made order (Bauman, 1992).

Powell (2005) suggests that the Enlightenment can be summarised in two words: 'criticism and power' and he posits the idea put forward by Ernst Cassirer that the Enlightenment signified the joining together of 'critical thought' and 'productive action'. However, Powell (2005) argues that we should avoid interpretations of the Enlightenment which view it as one overarching doctrine. The experience of the Enlightenment varied greatly between different countries. Britain, Germany, France and Italy all had different approaches in terms of the extent of their political activity and the institutions that were involved. There was no one body of Enlightenment theory; enlightenment intellectuals were united in a family sense in terms of their *style* of thinking and were situated in a particular cultural climate (Powell, 2005).

Today, unity between advocates of modernist sociology (Habermas, 1992) and post-modernist theorists is exceptionally brittle. Central to post-modernist thought is a deconstruction of enlightenment idealism. The next section engages with such deconstructionism and analyses if the 'project of modernity' is defensible in an adverse and uncertain world.

Deconstructing Occidental Modernity: Postmodernism, Fragmentation and Difference

If western 'modernism', as a term applied to culture, is characterised by the rise in avant-garde forms of literature, and art and so on in the early 20th century and the rejection of previous restrictive styles and structures (Powell, 2005) then it can be argued also that 'postmodernism' in culture came about in the 1970s and offered 'a wider and more dynamic understanding of contemporary representation' than any previous viewpoints (McRobbie, 1994: 13). It signalled an erosion of boundaries and a destabilising of high/low cultural barriers.

According to Thompson (1992) postmodernism did not only affect culture as a whole new social epoch emerged due to a range of developments in all areas of society such as politics, industry, media and the rise of social movements which ultimately has led to the development of a postmodern world characterised by 'fragmentation, multiplicity, plurality and indeterminacy' (Thompson, 1992: 223). If this characterisation is correct, it has had strong implications for the Enlightenment aims and values of modernist sociology.

Indeed, within Sociology, Bauman claims that postmodernity is, above all, a state of mind (Bauman, 1992: vii). He suggests that the term 'modernity' has come about only through the postmodern vantage point. The labelling of modernity is merely a re-evaluation of the past and is not a term which is simply descriptive of a certain period in the logical progression of history (Bauman, 1992). Postmodernism represents a shift of focus from universalism to pluralism. It is the acceptance that modern aims of universalism are futile and the recognition of '*pluralism* of cultures, communal traditions, ideologies, 'forms of life' or 'language games'" (Bauman, 1992: 102). Two postmodern scholars have gained notoriety for their critique of modernist sociology.

Firstly, Baudrillard adopts an extreme abandonment of Enlightenment values in his devastating critique of modern sociology. Baudrillard focuses on the transcendental nature of society through the concept of 'hyperreality'. He argued that in today's society there is no distinction between reality and illusion (Hollinger, 1994), and that individuals live their lives through a simulation of reality. Nothing has any true origin or authenticity and lived experience is itself a mere construction, made of a series of depthless signs and representations (Powell, 2005). In this way Baudrillard argues that sociology can serve no political purpose anymore as power relations have been dispersed through the hyperreal nature of society (Smart, 1993). The 'neat divisions', 'hierarchies', and 'foundational premises' of both modernity and sociology (Seidman, 1998) are no longer relevant. In particular, Baudrillard rejects the economic determinism of Marxism (as is true of all the first wave postmodernists) and states that there are no longer such fundamental systems of exploitation, only superficial simulations and exchanges (Powell, 2005).

'Like the philosopher Nietzsche, Baudrillard criticizes such claims to truth and favours a model based on what he calls seduction. Seduction plays on the surface: it is the surface appearance that is effective in determining action, not some latent or hidden structure as claimed by Marxism or Freudianism.' (Thompson, 1992: 244.)

Secondly, the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard is also largely based on a rejection of modern 'grand narrative' sociology. In the late 1960s Lyotard was a member of a radical Marxist group in France and was involved in the political action that took place in French universities in 1968. However, in his work of the early 1970s he began to develop a form of post-Marxist social thought (Seidman, 1994). In order to do this Lyotard found it necessary to distinguish between what constituted pre-modern, modern and postmodern thought and he then set out to deconstruct the

way in which bodies of knowledge are created in order to legitimate hierarchical structures in society (Powell, 2005).

In his landmark work *'The Postmodern Condition'* (1984, first published in French in 1979) Lyotard looked at the changes that have occurred to the nature of 'knowledge' throughout history. He pointed to how premodern society was based on narratives that were made up of religion and myth (Seidman, 1998). Knowledge was a 'body of stories' that were thought to explain the way society was and determine that which was 'good' or 'evil'. In this way such narratives legitimated the social rules of behaviour that determined how society was structured and who had authority (Seidman, 1998). In contrast modernity, Lyotard argued, was thought to be based on 'true' knowledge that rejected the 'narratives' of premodernity. Lyotard asserts that supposedly 'pure', 'real' scientific knowledge is also self-legitimizing so is itself merely another 'narrative' (McLennan, 1992: 332). Lyotard argues that scientific thought and knowledge has political and philosophical agendas and is therefore value laden (McLennan, 1992: 333). An ideal that underpinned the beginnings of Enlightenment thought was that the attainment of absolute knowledge for all would mean the attainment of absolute freedom for all (Connor, 1989: 30).

It was thought that knowledge was the key to breaking down power structures that had existed during the domination of premodern narratives. But Lyotard (1981) pointed to the contradictions within modern scientific bodies of knowledge and argued that they are themselves still made up of hierarchical power structures. Just as in earlier society narratives served to determine who had the right to speak and who did not, Lyotard states that this is still the case. Hierarchies still operate and serve to give the decision making elite the power to decide what gets defined as legitimate knowledge (Powell, 2005).

'Countless scientists have seen their "move" ignored or repressed, sometimes for decades, because it too abruptly destabilized the accepted positions, not only in the university and scientific hierarchy, but also in the problematic.' (Lyotard, 1984: 63).

Lyotard argues therefore that science can no longer be seen as a unified body working towards the emancipation of humanity (Connor, 1989: 31). His ideas can be linked to those of Nietzsche who believes that 'truth' and 'knowledge' are merely a 'matter of conventions that falsify and dissimulate to promote human survival' (Hollinger, 1994: 105). The assertion by science that it is constantly objectively striving for truth and progress is called into question by the fact that the search for

knowledge is inextricably linked to achieving economic growth in society (McLennan, 1992: 332).

Since, as Lyotard (1984) points out, the legitimation of science can be called into question, knowledge as a unified, overarching metanarrative (such as the Enlightenment narrative that knowledge = liberation) as was key in modernity, breaks down into a wide range of 'micronarratives' (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv Connor, 1989: 32). Each separate specialism has a different discourse and play different 'language games' in an attempt to gain accreditation from their specific audience (Seidman, 1994: 208; McLennan, 1992: 333; Lyotard, 1984: 64). This to Lyotard is what ultimately characterises the 'Postmodern Condition'.

'Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives' (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv)

By rejecting the belief in the ability to universalise, philosophical thought loses its authority to make any suggestions as to what action can be taken in order to make changes in society (Smart, 1993: 37). In response to the criticisms of the Enlightenment made by Lyotard, Habermas wishes to consolidate the 'project of modernity' and further argues that we should not completely abandon the possibility of a rational pursuit of truth (Steuerman, 1992: 107). He defends modernity and argues that what is needed is more philosophical discussion, not less (Steuerman, 1992: 113). Habermas states that through the use of communicative action, language and rational dialogue, the Enlightenment aims of truth, justice and freedom are still attainable alongside social consensus (Steuerman, 1992: 104-107). However, Lyotard argues that Habermas ignores the fact that communication cannot simply take the form of consensual, rational dialogue, it will always take place in the context of power struggles (Bertens, 1995: 128).

Therefore, rather than holding on to the ideals of Enlightenment scientific thought, Lyotard might suggest that we attempt to 'restructure' sociology in a postmodern vein so that we might find a democratic, pluralistic solution (Seidman, 1994: 207). He argued that whilst grand narratives, such as the Marxian narrative of class conflict, were well intentioned and essential to modernist sociology, to continue to utilise such concepts failed adequately to challenge the hierarchical structures in society (even though such hierarchies have become less steep over time) and therefore continued to marginalize and repress issues of difference.

'Postmodern science abandons absolute standards, universal categories and grand theories in favour of local, contextualized, and pragmatic conceptual strategies.' (Seidman, 1994: 207)

Seidman outlines the postmodern idea that the splintering of metanarratives has occurred to such an extent that society has become decentered. Individuals experience their lives at constantly shifting intersections of different discourses and language games. Instances of oppression, therefore, occur in many different contexts as individuals constantly construct, deconstruct and reconstruct themselves in terms of these 'fractured identities' (Bradley, 1996: 211). However, where this could not be explained utilising modern grand narratives which centred on one concept such as class conflict, Lyotard argues that a postmodern analysis does offer a way of explaining issues of multiplicity and difference (Powell, 2005: 95).

Postmodernism: A De-Radicalised Narrative?

The postmodern colonisation of the 'death of the social' by French post-Marxists such as Lyotard and Baudrillard may exemplify (in a hyperreal analytical metaphor) throwing the 'axe' at the heart of sociology but it may turn into a 'boomerang' of theoretical critique and subsequently levels itself inwardly at their postmodern narrativity. Indeed, postmodernists such as Lyotard (1984) are in a sense claiming to be the new holders of 'local truths' whilst at the same time denouncing that such a theorization of finding 'truth' is a reification of reality. Indeed, Barbara Christian suggests that postmodernism seeks to deconstruct the very tradition that it belongs to in terms of language and forms (Christian, 1996: 315). This is a view shared by Giddens, who argues that, Lyotardian postmodernism is merely an off-shoot of developments occurring within modernist sociology. Giddens states that:

'Modernity no longer equals Enlightenment: such is clear to almost everyone. The task now is to grasp the implications of this severance without relapsing into the aporias of postmodernism.' (Giddens, 1992: 174).

A main criticism of post-modernism is that the belief that there is no fixed 'truth' or meaning to anything is ultimately nihilistic and undermines any possibility of moral action (Powell, 2005). However, Lyotard argued that by taking a localised approach postmodernism was more adaptable than any grand narrative to address issues of power and oppression (Seidman, 1994: 207).

This is a view consolidated by Bauman (2001), who claims individual lives are affected by localised conditions and narratives, and what is needed is an analysis of to what extent the individual is governed by external conditions in terms of their life choices (Bauman, 2001). Power has progressed to a state which is not set or easily determined and can shift quickly and easily between situations. This is ultimately linked to the highly developed nature of what it is that is bought and sold as Capital (Bauman, 2001). Bauman argues that postmodern culture is effectively a

competitive market trading in 'life meanings' (Bauman, 2001: 4) and this can be linked to Lyotard's suggestion that knowledge has become the product of different 'specialisms' to be bought and sold for profit (Lyotard, 1984: 5). Similarly, the work of Frederic Jameson (1991) understood postmodernism as an extension of the 'logic of late capitalism'. Jameson argued that globalisation and multinational capitalism had resulted in mass consumerism and the *total* commodification of culture where 'images, styles and representations...are the products themselves' (Connor, 1989: 46). However, Hall argues that the postmodern idea of cultural homogenisation is too simplistic (Hall, 1992: 304); in our restructuring of theory we should acknowledge how the 'global' and the 'local' articulate and recognise that globalisation is unevenly distributed globalisation is also a western phenomenon indicative of the unequal power relations between 'occidental modernity' and 'the rest' (Powell, 2005).

One of the compelling criticisms of an aspirational postmodern sociology is that it offers no vehicle for social transformation (Waters, 1996), to abandon the values of Enlightenment ultimately means there would be no pursuit of critical and generalisable knowledge. This is a view held by Callinicos who states that postmodernity 'is merely a theoretical construct' (Callinicos, 1989: 9) and that we should in no way move away from reductionism and grand narratives. Only through the utilisation of Marx's concept of class conflict will sociology retain its ability to transform the world. To abandon modernist sociology, Callinicos states, would mean 'there is little left for us to do, except, like Lyotard and Baudrillard, to fiddle while Rome burns' (Callinicos, 1989: 174).

The sociological implications for the duality yet binary opposition of 'postmodernity v modernity' has caught the attention of Zygmunt Bauman (1992) in his analysis of what exactly postmodern critique meant for sociology as a discipline. For Bauman, postmodernism poses the threat of abandonment of the sociological discipline if 'intellectuals' respond to it by taking the stance that 'only universal mayhem can follow the disappearance of universality-claiming truths' (Bauman, 1992). He states that postmodernism creates an 'ethical paradox' for sociologists; on the one hand it restores moral choice, subjectivity and responsibility but on the other hand it takes away the comfort and legitimisation that comes from belief in universal truths (Bauman, 1992).

Bauman (1992) points out that within the disciplinary subject matter of sociology the central focus has shifted. This move away from the ultimate goal of finding universal truths has coincided with a focus more on the skills, techniques and materials used by intellectuals as valid subject matter of intellectual study in itself

(Bauman, 1992: 94). The process of sociological thought is no longer purely a means to an end, it is itself up for discussion and theorisation. This, Bauman argues, is a response to the failure of modern processes and aims. Furthermore, Bauman states that the postmodern world has led to a 'status crisis' for intellectuals within sociology and he says that this must be understood in the context of three key contributory factors (Bauman, 1992: 96).

Firstly, fundamental is the realisation that idealistic notions of a global utopia and universal standards of living, such as those put forward by the 'founding fathers', are ethnocentric and gendered (Bauman, 1992). There has been a general acceptance that it is no longer worthwhile to believe in the possibility of a global structure of domination that could oversee equal standards and quality of life world wide. Those who still search for universal truths are considered unrealistic. However it is important to point out that whilst this is generally the case in the intellectual world, the decline of belief in global standards has not necessarily been recognised in political action (Bauman, 1992).

Secondly, the decline in universality means that political domination is no longer maintained through legitimation obtained via what is considered to be universally, morally correct and true (Bauman, 1992). Instead domination is achieved and maintained through more complex means of seduction and repression. Previous forms of legitimation, which were the focus of much sociological inquiry, have become irrelevant. Instead what has become of central importance is cultural knowledge which provides the power and means to manipulate in order to seduce and repress (Bauman, 1992).

Thirdly, what is more which contributes to the 'status crisis' is that because of a thirst for cultural knowledge, culture is no longer the private property of intellectuals as it once was (Bauman, 1992). Their status has been undermined because cultural advancements are now firmly in the hands of powerful cultural capitalists and bureaucrats such as gallery owners and television executives. Such people have taken the groundwork done by intellectuals, in terms of cultural theory, and have turned it to their advantage in the ways that they mould and reshape culture. By tapping into such knowledge they are able to manipulate the public and therefore they are the ones wielding the most cultural power, no longer the intellectual elite (Bauman, 1992: 100). The culmination of these three dimensions of the 'crisis' among sociology intellectuals has left a 'feeling of anxiety, out-of-placeness, loss of direction which constitutes the true referent of the concept of postmodernity' (Bauman, 1992: 101).

The End of Modernist Sociology?

Whilst some sociologists might still hold onto Enlightenment values (Habermas, 1981), Seidman states that it is dangerous for them to completely ignore postmodernism or even to acknowledge it but carry on regardless (Seidman, 1998: 317). The disempowerment of intellectuals which has come about amidst postmodernism leads us to question what social role, if any, do sociologists have now that they are no longer needed to advise on policy or culture? Comte's claim that sociology would be a science of society for its own sake now sounds 'hollow and implausible' (Seidman, 1998: 317). Seidman argues that to continue to advocate the values and approaches of modernism will seal the fate of sociology as an insular and largely obsolete discipline (Seidman, 1998: 318).

Historically sociology was considered to have public relevance and be able to produce scientific, objective commentary in the pursuit of 'progress'. However the wide spread social protests of 1968 in Paris challenged the premises of Enlightenment sociology and led to many French theorists (such as Lyotard and Baudrillard) questioning whether 'knowledge' could be scientific (Seidman, 1998: 299). For Seidman, it is this idea of sociology *as a science* which is ultimately the 'dead weight' under which sociology could potentially suffocate (Seidman, 1998: 346). It is therefore necessary to acknowledge this and abandon the highly suspicious Enlightenment premise of scientific knowledge (Foucault, 1977).

For both Seidman and Bauman what is key in the analysis of the possibility of a postmodern sociology is that what is needed is a shift of focus in terms of the role of the intellectual (Seidman, 1998: 318). Sociology should uproot itself from Enlightenment legislative aims and set itself up as an interpretative body. The sociologist should focus on gaining an understanding of the world around us, making the unfamiliar familiar, not on gaining rigid universal laws (Seidman, 1998). Bauman stated that postmodern sociology 'can legitimize its right to exist... only if it does exactly this: if it generates a social-scientific discourse which theorizes different aspects of contemporary experience, or theorizes them in a different way' (Bauman, 1992: 93). Seidman agrees and predicts that 'postmodern paradigms of human studies' will take the place of 'modern social science' and that they can be compared on three main levels (Seidman, 1992: 348): firstly, in modern social science, the social scientist is considered capable of complete impartiality and able to relay pure, objective knowledge. But in the postmodern paradigms of human studies the social scientist is thought of as inextricably influenced by their social and historical identity; secondly, where modern social science was based on the belief in an underlying

universal structure, postmodern paradigms highlight the fact that regardless of the possibility of a universal structure we construct and experience all social processes and situations in response to a historically specific and unique context; thirdly is once again regarding the actual role of the intellectual. The modern view was that the social scientist was striving to discover scientific knowledge in a detached way in the pursuit of public enlightenment and social progress. However the postmodern social scientist takes on the role of interpretive social analyst and public educator. The social knowledge that they produce is recognised as having moral and political significance in terms of the potential it has to mould and influence public life.

Conclusion

In assessing the implications of postmodernity for modernist sociology it is important to give postmodernism the credit it deserves and take note of both the epistemological and ontological possibilities it allows for sociological theorizing (Seidman, 1998; Bauman and May, 2003). As Habermas (1992) points out, within intellectual debate postmodernism is too often seen as purely an attack on the values of Enlightenment and modernity without offering anything with which to move forward. Habermas (1981) claims that the 'project of modernity' must not only be viewed as a theoretical necessity but also one of which requires utter commitment and practical implementation and realization. Habermas (1981) castigates Lyotard as representing 'young conservatives' because of their neo-Nietzschean discourses of irrationality and pessimism. Further, Habermas (1981) claims that the project of modernity is 'unfinished' and contains unlimited capacity for emancipatory potential. Such potential draws on the specialization of culture for the enrichment of daily life and simultaneously the rational organisational of everyday life and experience. The project of modernity has unlimited potential to increase social rationality, justice and morality; this can be realised by cognitive progression and moral boundaries of rationality. From Habermas' (1984) point of view, the defence of the enlightenment is qualified. He gives sweeping castigation to the 'young conservatives' such as Lyotard whom he accuses of setting up 'false programs of the negation of culture' which fail to realise positive contribution to project of modernity.

Whilst Habermas optimistically wishes to strengthen modernist sociological theorizing, he will not adhere to any of the postmodern claims. With periodic episodes of inhumanity ranging from 9/11, the Holocaust to genocide in Rwanda and 'ethnic cleansing in Kosova, the modernist project of 'emancipation' seems fragile. What is clear is that not only must we assess whether the *values* of Enlightenment

sociology are to be abandoned but we must go further and evaluate the *role* that sociology will take on in a postmodern world. Indeed, it is perhaps worth asking: what happens to Sociology *beyond* postmodernism? and postmodernism *beyond* Sociology?

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