

Postmodernism and Sociology: From the Epistemological to the Empirical*

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This article investigates the place of postmodernism in sociology today by making a distinction between its epistemological and empirical forms. During the 1980s and early 1990s, sociologists exposed, appropriated, and normalized an epistemological postmodernism that thematizes the tentative, reflective, and possibly shifting nature of knowledge. More recently, however, sociologists have recognized the potential of a postmodern theory that turns its attention to empirical concerns. Empirical postmodernists challenge classical modern concepts to develop research programs based on new concepts like time-space reorganization, risk society, consumer capitalism, and postmodern ethics. But they do so with an appreciation for the uncertainty of the social world, ourselves, our concepts, and our commitment to our concepts that results from the encounter with postmodern epistemology. Ultimately, this article suggests that understanding postmodernism as a combination of these two moments can lead to a sociology whose epistemological modesty and empirical sensitivity encourage a deeper and broader approach to the contemporary social world.

After more than two decades of sociological ruminations on the topic of postmodernism, we seem, in some ways, to have reached saturation and to be turning away from the use of the term. As early as 1987, a newspaper column on design announced the recession of postmodernism (Gitlin 1989:191). That architectural experts described the waning of postmodernism first is not surprising, as architecture is usually considered the birthplace of postmodernism (Jencks 1987; Portoghesi 1983). More recently, sociologists, late to embrace the postmodern, have been speaking of its demise (Runciman 1999; Demerath 1996) and a time period after postmodernism (Antonio 2000; Owen 1997; Mouzelis 1996; McLennon 1995). But, despite these arguments, the term persists (Agger 2002; Delanty 2000; Callinicos 1999; Allan 1998; Anderson 1998; Jameson 1998; Lemert 1997).¹

Another seeming end to postmodernism comes from those who intend to replace postmodernism with late modernism, reflexive modernism, and radicalized modernism

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¹Social theorists on both side of the Atlantic Ocean have made strong statements regarding the institutionalization of postmodernism within sociology: "Postmodernism has become the Parsonian sociology of our fin de siecle" (Callinicos 1999:297); "While in the 1970s anything with the word 'Marxist' in its title could get published, in the 1980s and 1990s it was anything with the word 'postmodern' or 'postmodernism'" (Evans 2001:164); "The idea of the postmodern is no longer a novelty in social theory. Themes that had been the recondite concerns of an avant-garde in the 1980s and exploded into an intellectual craze-cum-publishing bonanza in the early 1990s are now part of the standard repertoire of social theory and cognate disciplines. Undergraduate students in cultural studies and sociology learn to distinguish the postmodern from other theoretical 'frameworks' or 'perspectives,' ably assisted by the textbooks, readers, and websites now available" (Crook 2001:308).

(Beck 1997, 1994, 1992; Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994; Giddens 1994a, 1994b, 1994c, 1992, 1991, 1990). When we examine the themes, issues, and topics of these approaches, however, we find them to be similar to what postmodernists pursue.² It is possible that what these new terms reveal is a turn away from some facets of postmodernism: a break with a particular type of late 1980s and early 1990s postmodernism. Evidence below suggests that we are leaving behind one variety of postmodernism, involving questions about the possibilities of social science and of knowledge and proposals of alternative ways of gathering and analyzing data. Instead, we are engaging in another sort of postmodernism that searches for concepts to shed light on and to help form a changing empirical world. Recent sociologists and social theorists are moving from what I term epistemological postmodernism to empirical postmodernism.

Defining the postmodern is a perilous enterprise and naming subpostmodernisms is similarly risky. One of the insights of postmodernism relates to the hazards of definition, of the power play that is behind any attempt to box a living, breathing, fragmented, ever newly constituted thinker. Nevertheless, it is possible to seek the poles behind the rhetoric and practice of postmodernism and to create new, albeit temporary, categories to describe what we find. Since the concept of postmodernism was made popular in the English-speaking world by the English publication of Jean-Francois Lyotard ([1979] 1984) *The Postmodern Condition* and its Appendix, "Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernity?" the debate has centered on questions of knowledge. Lyotard's pivotal book is subtitled *A Report on Knowledge* and he makes clear in his first sentence that he uses the word postmodern to describe the state of knowledge in developed societies today.³ Since Lyotard, postmodern thinkers have continued to pose epistemological questions—questions about scientific methodology, the possibility of foundations for what is proposed as truth or knowledge, the relationship between this knowledge and power, the role of the subject in knowledge, imperfections of representing knowledge through language, and the possibility of universal knowledge. The postmodern debates over these questions extend through social theory, philosophy, cultural studies, and other disciplines.

But slowly, and almost unremarked so far, postmodernists, especially in sociology, have begun to move beyond epistemology to grasp what could be termed a new postmodern world. In doing so, they have challenged the usefulness, relevance, applicability, and centrality of some key concepts of classical social theory: the centrality of the nation-state (Giddens 1994a, 1994b, 1994c, 1991, 1990; Jameson 1991; Harvey 1989), industrial society (Beck 1999, 1997, 1992; Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994), production-based capitalism (Ritzer, Goodman, and Wiedenhof 2001; Gottdiener 2000a, 2000b; Jameson 1998, 1991, 1984; Agger 1989; Harvey 1989; Kellner 1988; Lash and Urry 1987; Offe 1985), and social relations of morality (Bauman 1997, 1995, 1993, 1992). Their concerns have been to interrogate existing

²Beck (1997, 1994, 1992), Giddens (1994a, 1994b, 1994c, 1990, 1991, 1992), and Beck, Giddens, and Lash (1994) use all of these terms to contrast their perspective with the postmodern perspective. Their substantive point is that we are still dealing with the long-range effects of modernity, so that it is not appropriate to jettison the term modern. Nonetheless, Beck, Lash, and Giddens share a number of characteristics with postmodernists. First, they still see a rupture between the present period and the modern period, as do postmodernists, and second, they use modernity as a contrasting point for the perspective they argue. Third, the suggested causes and characteristics of this rupture are not dissimilar to what those who call themselves postmodern propose. Some have even concluded that these "continuists" are more radical than many postmodernists or "discontinuists" (Crook 2001:318). I go on to talk about these thinkers later as empirical postmodernists.

³The object of this study is the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies. I have decided to use the word postmodern to describe that condition" (Lyotard 1984:xxiii).

sociological theories from the perspective of the contemporary social world to recast classical paradigms and to create new concepts to better describe contemporary society, culture, economics, and politics. I call this new postmodern sociology *empirical postmodernism* to differentiate it from the period before.

The contributions of this article are three. The first is to locate the place of postmodernism in sociology today, to make a distinction between its epistemological and empirical forms. The second contribution is to show the potential of a postmodern theory that turns its attention to empirical concerns. Empirical postmodernists are pushing forward our understandings of time and space, industrialization and risk, contemporary capitalism, and new social relations of morality. But they do so with a modesty resulting from the encounter with postmodern epistemology. Ultimately, I show how the increased self-awareness fostered by epistemological postmodernism combines with the grounded surefootedness of empirical postmodernism to inspire sociologists to selectively reappropriate modern concepts and to reinvigorate enlightenment themes of freedom, equality, rationality, and progress.

The organization is as follows. To illustrate postmodern epistemology, I locate its genesis in 1960s and 1970s French thinkers, detailing the postmodern crisis of knowledge catalyzed by perceived crises in the arts, science, knowledge, and representation. I briefly develop the challenges to modern epistemology and the resulting new postmodern epistemologies defining the works of Michel Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Jean Baudrillard. I next describe what I call postmodernism's exposition, appropriation, and normalization by American sociologists. I concentrate on normalization and the recent sociological argument that postmodernism, with its methods of deconstruction, is not dramatically different from the ongoing sociological projects of reading structures and organizations as socially constructed. I then locate empirical postmodernism as part of a downward shift among social theorists mobilized by a sense of unrecognized changes in the social world that call for a reinterrogation of classical social theoretical concepts and a new interrogation of the contemporary social world. I argue that what is new about postmodern sociology, about empirical postmodernism, as opposed to epistemological postmodernism, is its ability to conceptualize the rapid changes of the contemporary world and to spawn new research here.

THE POSTMODERN CRISIS IN KNOWLEDGE

Early postmodern thinkers writing in France in the 1960s and 1970s were by and large epistemological thinkers. Epistemological postmodern thinkers focus on the state of knowledge in contemporary society—how we know what we know, how we justify what we know as knowledge. Epistemological postmodernists do recognize the empirically observable social changes that prompt discourse about a new era. These changes are variously described in terms of computerization (Lyotard [1979] 1984), consumerism (Baudrillard [1970] 1998, [1968] 1996, [1972] 1981), or even more generally as a rupture “which is . . . political, economic, technical and so forth” (Derrida [1966] 1978:450). But, in each of these cases, the existence of a postmodern society is only a distant cause for what these thinkers find more central, namely, issues of the state of knowledge in contemporary society. Says Lyotard: “Our working hypothesis is that the *status of knowledge* is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age” ([1979] 1984:3; italics mine). Says Derrida, an “event has occurred

in the history of the *concept* of structure” ([1966] 1978:278; italics mine). The change in how we talk about structure in the human sciences becomes the topic of Derrida’s ([1966] 1978) seminal essay.⁴

One catalyst to the development of epistemological postmodern social theory was transformation in the arts. New forms in painting, literature, and architecture were called postmodern as early as the 1940s and 1950s, and cultural theorists began to thematize these new styles in the 1960s and 1970s. In architecture, Jencks’s (1977) influential book, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, helped promote the new eclectic and populist postmodern style over the formalism of modernists like Le Corbusier. In literature and the arts, literary theorists like Susan Sontag, Leslie Fiedler, and Ihab Hassan celebrated pop art, film culture, multi-media light shows, and rock concerts as countering the oppressively formal effects of modernism. These cultural movements in literature and art influenced postmodern knowledge, which in their wake came to emphasize pastiche, playfulness, fragmentation, eclecticism, difference, otherness, pleasure, novelty, and attacked reason and traditional hermeneutics.

A second catalyst for epistemological postmodernism, beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, was poststructuralism. Poststructuralists emphasize epistemological issues: they take questions about modernism raised in architecture, art, and literature and extend them to knowledge and truth. Specifically, poststructuralists critique modern philosophy’s foundationalist approach, break with conventional modes of representation to argue for reality as an effect of language, argue for the impossibility of universal grand narratives such as Marxism, emphasize the importance of difference over unity, problematize subjectivity, and reconstitute science. Indeed, most postmodernists, affected by this intense theoretical upheaval, are poststructuralists; they share these epistemological critiques, radicalize them, and extend them into new theoretical fields like politics, society, and history. But, while postmodernists may be poststructuralists, poststructuralists are not necessarily postmodernists in that they are not likely to thematize epochal change, provide an account of postmodernity, or intervene in postmodernist debates (Kumar 1995; Best and Kellner 1991).⁵

A third catalyst in the development of epistemological postmodernism was the poststructuralist-led crisis in representation initiated specifically by Derrida. As Derrida points out in his seminal 1966 essay, before the crisis in representation, knowledge in the form of conceptual structures, templates for the social and political world, involved some sort of center to balance and organize an overall structure, to limit the play within it. The crisis in the concept of structure came as people became epistemologically aware: conscious of structure, with its accompanying center, as structured, and of knowledge generally as socially and individually constituted. In other words, they realized that the knowledge forms they had been considering as somehow natural were actually “representations.” American philosopher Rorty (1979) further developed

⁴Derrida’s (1966) seminal work on structuralism and poststructuralism is “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.”

⁵In other words, I refer to poststructuralism as the historical movement stemming from 1960s French philosophy involving cultural issues and mainly epistemological topics (critiques of subject-centered reason, of grand narratives, of general truth claims, and of the Enlightenment generally). In contrast, I see postmodernism as a broader movement, encompassing poststructuralism, concerned with describing a new epoch, both intellectually and empirically. “Postmodernism is the most comprehensive of recent theories. It includes in its generous embrace all forms of change, cultural, political, and economic” (Kumar 1995). “Thus in our view, postmodern theory is a more inclusive phenomenon than poststructuralism which we interpret as a critique of modern theory and a production of new models of thought, writing, and subjectivity, some of which are taken up by postmodern theory” (Best and Kellner 1991:25–26).

the crisis in representation. He questioned what he called the mirror theory of knowledge, the idea that it is possible to hold a reflecting glass up to nature or society or the polity and see the unvarnished truth. Ultimately, he used the crisis in representation to challenge entire branches of philosophical thought. The crisis in representation also plays a significant catalyzing moment in the work of epistemological postmodernists Foucault, Lyotard, and Baudrillard.

If representations are socially and individually constituted, it was not a big step to question the objectivity and neutrality of science, and debates about the state of science were a fourth catalyst to postmodern epistemological concerns. Scientific writers were suggesting that science could not ground itself. Godel (1962) established the existence, in the arithmetic system, of a proposition that cannot be established from within that system but requires outside proof. His contribution was to show that mathematics is not a self-justifying discipline. Kuhn (1962) and Feyerabend (1975) suggested that the state of science, at any point, is simply a paradigm that has replaced but not necessarily invalidated previous paradigms and is itself always vulnerable to replacement.⁶ To move from one theory to another, from Newton to Einstein, for example, we merely change these assumptions.⁷

Crises in architecture and art, knowledge, representation, and science raised a number of questions for the postmodern theory that developed in the 1970s and 1980s in France and beyond. If knowledge is always representational and science is always paradigmatic, if universal, rationally founded knowledge is thereby distorting, then how do we ensure knowledge that stresses, as does postmodern art, difference, perspective and pluralism, emotion, and so on. If subject-centered knowledge is not good then how do we de-center it? Foucault, Lyotard, and Baudrillard are three central epistemological postmodernists who accept the premise of these questions and are in some sense united in trying to provide answers to them. Each is defined by three central moments. They are each catalyzed by empirical conditions in the contemporary world whether they define these conditions as modern or postmodern. They are critical of existing modern epistemological methods of approaching that empirical world. Finally, they propose new or postmodern epistemological methods of studying the world: they respond to the incredulities and skepticisms of the postmodern epistemological crisis by trying to constitute knowledge anew.

⁶Newton was able to explain gravity, one of the four fundamental forces thought to constitute the physical world. Einstein's theory, which replaced it, was able to reconcile the three other physical forces—the strong and weak forces in an atom and electromagnetivity, but it could not explain these forces in conjunction with gravity. Thus, instead of saying that one of these theories is more right or true than any other, contemporary observers say that different theories make different beginning assumptions that allow them to privilege different aspects of physical reality. "The argumentation required for a scientific statement to be accepted is thus subordinated to a 'first' acceptance (which is constantly renewed by virtue of the principle of recursion) of the rules defining the allowable means of argumentation" (Lyotard [1979] 1984:43).

⁷Works such as those of Kuhn, Feyerabend, and Godel serve as sparks to a more general crisis in legitimation. Epistemological postmodernists ask: If science cannot legitimate itself, that is, if the rules of science cannot be established inside or outside of science, then can any knowledge system ground itself? Can political and social structures legitimate themselves? For epistemological postmodernists, issues of science have opened up broader debates. As Jameson (1984:viii) puts it: "'Doing science' involves its own kind of legitimation...and may therefore be investigated as a subset of the vaster political problem of the legitimation of a whole social order." He argues that "[d]oing 'normal' science and participating in lawful and orderly social reproduction are then two phenomena—better still, two mysteries—that ought to be able to illuminate one another" (1984:viii). For cognitive or epistemological questions to spark issues about social and political order is not unusual. In talking about late 19th-century European society, Wagner (1992:471) says: "The question of the adequate political representation of the people gained prominence simultaneously with the question of nineteenth century European society, adequate cognitive representation of society."

*Foucault*⁸

Foucault's work was certainly catalyzed by empirical conditions. Frustrated by the abstractness of the philosophy he studied with Hyppolite and Althusser, his first two books on the insane asylum and the medical clinic are based in part on his observations of psychiatric practice in French mental hospitals during the early 1950s (Sheridan 1980). His later works on the prison and sexuality are also empirically based. But, it is important to note that all these empirical studies are of the modern world. Foucault was interested in modern techniques of domination; Foucault's postmodernism comes in his systematic critiques of modern epistemology and the epistemologically new methods of archaeology and genealogy he applies to understand modern practices. I want to argue here then that Foucault is an empirical modernist but an epistemological postmodernist.

Foucault criticizes modern epistemology on a number of grounds. Central to his critiques is the problem of representation. He rejects the idea of knowledge and truth and language as neutral, and instead argues that knowledge is always connected to power: modern discourses that formalize knowledge, discourses on sexuality, insanity, criminality, and so on, regulate and control our experiences. Foucault also critiques modern epistemology's universalism, suggesting that no one philosophical system or vantage viewpoint can grasp the plurality of discourses, institutions, or modes of power in modern society. Instead, Foucault favors respect for difference and perspective and the uncertainty and contingency they bring. These insights and goals are encapsulated in his postmodern methods of archaeology and genealogy.

Archaeology of knowledge is a postmodern epistemology that searches for the fundamental rules or conditions of knowledge (epistemes or what counts as rational or true), often discursive, of an era to show their contingency and plurality. This method characterizes Foucault's early works.⁹ *The Order of Things* (Foucault [1966] 1973), which catapulted Foucault to fame in France and beyond, is perhaps his most epistemological work: it is an archaeology of knowledge itself tracing the rules of the human sciences that led to the centering of human knowledge on humans (the birth of man) and anticipating the end to man as an epistemological subject (death of man). Foucault's later works incorporate genealogical research, which adds institutional analysis to archaeology's discursive focus. *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1977) looks at the individual, body, and soul, as both discursively and institutionally constructed. *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1980) studies the way power over sex operates through both the discursive production of sexuality and through the polymorphous techniques of power that have governed the body since the 16th century. Again, each of these projects, whether archaeological or genealogical, rejects a unidimensional evolutionary perspective in favor of discontinuous, diverse, and multidimensional histories.

Ultimately, we remember Foucault for the postmodern epistemological methods of archaeology and genealogy, appropriated by social scientists across the disciplines,

⁸Though I begin by discussing Foucault as an epistemological postmodernist, Foucault of course never himself used the term postmodern nor identified with postmodernism in any way, and his research traverses premodern, modern, and postmodern themes. Hence, while scholars across the disciplines have appropriated him as postmodern, he was a complex and varied thinker. I want to suggest that the terms epistemological and empirical postmodernism can help us to begin to identify the ways Foucault can and cannot appropriately be called postmodern.

⁹*The Birth of the Clinic* (Foucault [1963] 1975), subtitled *An Archaeology of Medical Perception, Madness & Civilization* (Foucault [1961] 1973), is an archaeology of the categories of madness and reason, and *The Order of Things* (Foucault [1966] 1973) is subtitled *An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*.

which led to many new insights into the topics of sex and self, prison and clinic, knowledge, science, and power.¹⁰ We remember him for the idea that at the base of human sciences is uncertainty and methodological and analytical ambiguity. We do not remember Foucault, however, for empirical insights into the postmodern—Foucault does not describe postmodern forms of power manifest in media, consumption, fashion, leisure, and semiotics; actually, he does not thematize any significant empirical developments in the mechanisms and operations of power since the 19th century (a point sharply contested by Baudrillard ([1977] 1987) in *Forget Foucault*). As Best and Kellner put it, reinforcing the distinction between epistemological and empirical postmodernism, “we should therefore distinguish between a theory of postmodern power [which Foucault does not give us] and a postmodern analytics of modern power [which Foucault does provide]” (1991:52). For these reasons, it makes sense to think of Foucault as an epistemological rather than an empirical postmodernist.

Liotard

Unlike Foucault, Lyotard is an uncontroversial postmodernist—he himself has accepted the term postmodern—and has spent his career consistently attacking modern epistemologies while attempting to develop new postmodern epistemologies. Like Foucault, Lyotard’s work was catalyzed by his observation of recent empirical conditions—for him technological changes related to the computer age, including cybernetics, informatics, information storage, data banks, and problems of translation from one computer language to another. But Lyotard does not seek to provide a systematic analysis of the (empirically manifest) socioeconomic or cultural conditions of postmodernity. Instead, Lyotard focuses on philosophical or epistemological questions, getting more abstract with time. Lyotard is an epistemological rather than an empirical postmodernist.

Lyotard’s major critique of modern epistemology, like that of Foucault, problematizes representation, in particular discourse. Lyotard and Foucault each critique totalizing and universalizing discourse and favor difference and plurality. But while Foucault seeks to undo hegemonic discourses by privileging a multiplicity of viewpoints, Lyotard (1971:14) seeks to disrupt discourse itself, arguing that “one does not break with all metaphysics by putting language everywhere.” Lyotard’s (1971) first works attempt to create nondiscursive postmodern epistemologies. In *Discours, Figure*, Lyotard epistemologically privileges sensory experience; he undertakes what he calls a “defense of the eye” involving a deep immersion in visual arts and images. In *Economie Libidinale*, Lyotard ([1974] 1993) develops an epistemology of desire; for Lyotard, the intensity of desire is best captured by “the tensor,” a certain sort of art and writing focused on imagery, poetic tropes, and ambiguity. *Discours, Figure* and especially *Economie Libidinale* are dramatic attempts to create new postmodern epistemologies.

Eventually, however, both Lyotard and his critics see epistemologies based on image and desire as dead ends, especially for addressing issues of justice.¹¹ In his

¹⁰The knowledge/power constellation is one of the great epistemological postmodern insights to come out of Foucault’s work. Foucault is famously associated with his central epistemological insight into the circularity of knowledge and power, how discourses of science, sexuality, and social science, among others, have emerged from existing relations of power and have in turn served to solidify that power through new techniques and practices.

¹¹In a transitional work, “Lessons in Paganism” (1989 [1977]), Lyotard and Thebaud (1985) discuss the limitations of a libidinal economy for addressing issues of justice. Here, they lay the basis for a postmodern politics of justice rooted in multiplicity, plurality, and marginality further developed in *Just Gaming*.

next major work, *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard ([1979] 1984) seeks to build a postmodern epistemology that does indeed utilize language but in new ways. Postmodern epistemology, as he reorients it, is against modern epistemological meta-narratives and is for heterogeneity, plurality, and local determination of local rules. In particular, Lyotard (1984) defines postmodern knowledge as the study of how “language games” constitute the self, society, and social relations in heterogeneous ways sending out “contradictory codes and interfering messages” (Lyotard 1984:xviii). Any knowledge we can have of language games is thus fractured, diverse, and discontinuous: it is made up of catastrophes, paradoxes, nonrectifiable dilemmas, and ironies. The role of the investigator is to insist on this instability, to disrupt more orderly knowledge—consensuses about the state of the world—if need be. The practice and legitimacy of knowledge is founded on the fact that it affirms differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable.

Baudrillard

Baudrillard, like Lyotard, eventually accepts the term postmodern to characterize his approach, and he has been feted as one of the most striking postmodernists. Baudrillard’s early work from the 1960s and 1970s is empirically engaged and thematizes new types of consumption and new media forms, but still as modern (Marxist) forms. In the 1980s, Baudrillard adopts the term postmodern, develops his dramatic critiques of modern epistemology, and creates a postmodern epistemology that comes to be known for its unprecedented, radical measures.¹² This epistemology dramatically colors the empirical analysis he continues to do, but Baudrillard never develops a comprehensive theory of the postmodern world. Thus, though he thematizes the empirical moments of postmodernity more than Foucault or Lyotard, his significant contributions are as an epistemological but not an empirical postmodernist.

In his first three empirically-oriented books (Baudrillard [1970] 1998, [1968] 1996, [1972] 1981), Baudrillard is still caught up in modernism as he seeks to extend Marx to critically account for the emergence and effects of mass consumption, as a replacement for mass production, at the basis of the social order. According to Baudrillard, Marx’s concepts of use value and exchange value are replaced by sign value—the expression or mark of style, prestige, luxury, and power—that allows meaning to circulate in much the same way that the commodity form allowed for goods’ circulation in Marx’s account. (A Gucci bag is not defined by what it can hold but by the fact that it is not made by Lands’ End and definitely not by Kmart.) Consumers are interjected into this system of meaningful objects, serve to perpetuate it, and are themselves classified by it, creating social order.

Baudrillard’s ([1973] 1975) critiques of modern epistemology begin in his fourth work *The Mirror of Production*. Here, he scathingly rejects the Marxian model for first tyrannizing and absorbing other social systems into its own model of production and, second, for imperialism, for requiring all other societies to account for themselves in productivist terms. Baudrillard ([1976] 1993, 1990, [1983] 1990, [1987] 1988, [1977] 1987, [1978] 1983, [1981] 1983) continues his epistemological critique of modern

¹²Best and Kellner (1991:128–32) refer to this 1980s period in contrast to the period that went before as Baudrillard’s “metaphysical turn.”

knowledge and his promulgations of postmodern alternatives in a series of widely discussed books and articles published in the 1970s and 1980s. In these works, Baudrillard foregrounds a central principle of epistemological postmodernism, the problem of representation: like Foucault and Lyotard he suggests that what we think of as reality is a reflection of language and other signs. The crisis of representation Baudrillard describes is a dramatic one; he does not simply problematize the relation between language and world or signifier and signified. He argues that representation of any sort may become impossible as the line between the representation and the real slowly collapses. In the world Baudrillard describes, representations have erased the reality their authenticity was judged against so that what we have are *simulacra*, copies without original, reproduced over and over until they become *hyperreal*, more real than the real, creating the postmodern age of *radical semiurgy* where signs take on a life of their own and constitute a new social order. With radical semiurgy comes the death of the social subject; the excess of information exhausts and ultimately destroys the social; the subject is blown up in its own staging as, for example, the social protesters watch their own protest on CNN. Baudrillard does more than any other epistemological postmodernist to de-center the subject and he refers to the process through which the social becomes the mass as implosion.

Is there any possibility of postmodern epistemology in Baudrillard given the epistemological crises Baudrillard thematizes? It is to Baudrillard's credit that though he posits the death of the social and, thus, even of sociology he does not posit the end to epistemology or knowledge. Baudrillard sees the role of the investigator as one of paralogy rather than homology, of disrupting and undoing existing forms, of complicating knowledge. He calls his complicating postmodern epistemology fatal theory and the guiding question to his fatal strategy is: Is there any logic to things—social/political/scientific/philosophical—from the perspective of the object? His answer is that studies from the perspective of the object are inevitably studies of seduction, and with an analysis of seduction Baudrillard believes that we can better understand the dynamics of late capitalist society—consumerism, the media, fashion, and pornography among other things. Baudrillard evidences this epistemology in recent empirical works such as *America* (Baudrillard [1986] 1988), *Cool Memories* (Baudrillard [1987] 1990), *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Baudrillard 1995), and *The Spirit of Terrorism; and, Requiem for the Twin Towers* (Baudrillard 2002).

But while Baudrillard goes much further than Foucault or Lyotard epistemologically in renouncing modern forms of representation and subjectivity and taking up the postmodern position of the other, he never develops an empirical theory of the postmodern that adequately justifies the claim to a break in history or describes the empirical world that results. As Best and Kellner point out, though Baudrillard's theory is stimulating in the ways it points to an empirically postmodern world, "ultimately his efforts remain woefully undertheorized and inadequate" for "developing a comprehensive theory of postmodernity, of a new historical epoch" (Best and Kellner 1991:143).

Thus, while each of these three thinkers, Foucault, Lyotard, and Baudrillard, traverse both empirical and epistemological ground, none presents comprehensive, empirically-based theories of a postmodern epoch. Instead, each develops challenges to modern epistemologies and significant, conceptually rich postmodern epistemologies ranging from archaeology and genealogy to language games to paralogy and fatal theory. From these three classic postmodern epistemologies,

we learn that knowledge is uncertain, fractured, and complex, and that if it does not immediately appear so, it is the social scientist's job to disrupt it to reveal underlying contradictions, conflicts, contextual terrain, and concealments. The method by which otherwise seemingly simple and closed knowledge is unraveled or subverted is referred to as deconstruction.¹³ The new epistemologies of Foucault, Lyotard, and Baudrillard present deconstructive variations.

SOCIOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO POSTMODERN EPISTEMOLOGY

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, sociologists exposit, appropriated, and ultimately normalized postmodern epistemology in ways that I demonstrate below. The ready, though late, meeting between epistemological postmodernism and sociology may be because many of postmodernism's methodological insights complement rather than challenge existing sociological practice. Indeed, in what I call the normalization stage of the relationship between postmodernism and sociology, sociologists question whether there is anything new epistemologically about postmodernism at all, a relatively recent and surprisingly general sociological argument. But if postmodern epistemology is not new to sociology, why has it appeared this way? I end this section by explicating the epistemological dilemma, a means that postmodernists use to create a line between modern and postmodern knowledge.

In the 1980s and into the early 1990s and beyond, sociologists exposit Lyotard, Baudrillard, and Foucault, sometimes also Rorty and Derrida, as the leading postmodern social theorists (see Bogard 1992; Rosenau 1992; Agger 1991; Kellner 1988; Denzin 1986). The goal was to exposit mostly French postmodern ideas to American sociologists who may have been unfamiliar with their works. For these early sociological commentators, the goal was explicitly to "sort out principal varieties of contemporary postmodern social theory" (Kellner 1988:241), to "review the major themes and problematics that have emerged over the last decade in postmodern social theory" (Denzin 1986:194), to "fill the need for an evaluation of the relevance of postmodernity in the social sciences" (Rosenau 1992:1), and to "bring...[postmodern] theoretical work to the attention of American sociologists" (Bogard 1992:2). More recently, there have been humorous attempts to introduce the postmodern to students (Berger 1997). The ongoing point is to examine, to assess, to explicate, and to make familiar the main epistemological postmodernists.

The second meeting of American sociology and epistemological postmodernism, appropriation, took place in the early 1990s. The question of the implications of postmodernism for sociology went from being little considered to dominating social theoretical discourse as social theorists found good reason to appropriate rather than simply exposit postmodern themes.¹⁴ It had been a general sociological contention of late that social theory had become an internally referring, closed off, alienated, and irrelevant project (Skocpol 1986; Wolfe 1992; Sica 1989). Arguably, postmodern

¹³As Lemert (1992:24) puts it, the "well-known term, deconstruction, is the method proper to a [postmodern] social theory." Derrida is, of course, the epistemological postmodernist most predominantly associated with deconstruction. He refuses to define deconstruction, preferring instead to illustrate it, and he and his disciples do just this, showing how false simplicity and closure is achieved by deferring other possible meanings and opening up (deconstructing) these same texts to reveal different perspectives and voices.

¹⁴Crook (2001:315) points out that "[w]ithin a very few years during the early 1990s, the question of the postmodern came to dominate social theory."

epistemology and methods appeared just in time to revitalize social theory and to show how it could be made relevant to the empirical world again.¹⁵ The promise was that a postmodern epistemology could bring social theory back to earth. The epistemology that has created the most debate is Seidman's (1991a:136) social theory as "social narrative with a moral intent."¹⁶ Narrative refers to the open, modest, local, particular, and contextually relevant¹⁷ aspects of this new epistemological form (Seidman 1992, 1991a, 1991b; Richardson 1991a, 1991b, 1988; Brown 1991, 1990).¹⁸ By "social narrative," Seidman means that social theory relates stories of origins, development, crisis, or decline. By "moral intent," Seidman means that social theory's intent is to have an effect, shape an outcome, influence history: for Seidman, social theory is always connected to the empirical world, in particular to contemporary social conflicts and public debate. But, critics of Seidman's narrative form wonder how much his postmodern epistemology differs from modern epistemology, and they point out his theoretical traditionalism: his supralocal pronouncements (Alexander 1991:150), his invocation of social progress (Antonio 1991:156), his pragmatism dependent on some sort of stability, certainty, and truth (Antonio 1991:157–59), and his use of dualisms. This argument leads to what I refer to as the third occasion for the meeting of American sociology with postmodern epistemology where it is argued that it is no surprise that the postmodern partakes of the modern as the modern has always partaken of what we now call postmodern.

The third meeting between sociology and epistemological postmodernism is normalization or the nothing new in postmodernism idea. It has been a surprisingly common argument as social theorists and sociological practitioners have endeavored to get to the bottom of the postmodern movement (see, for example, Crook 2001; Lemert 1997; Calhoun 1995, 1991; Wagner 1992; Alexander 1991; Mestrovic 1991; Brown 1990; Collins 1989; Denzin 1986). Proponents of the "nothing new" idea have argued that reference to the universalism/particularism debate, the awareness of difference, plurality, and multiple fragmented realities, the method of deconstruction, and resulting attention to the social construction of seemingly natural realities¹⁹ are all inherent to modern intellectual history generally and to sociology in particular. According to critics, we cannot equate

¹⁵According to both Seidman (1991a) and Richardson (1991a), sociological theory's malaise could be attributed to the social theoretical quest for a single universal foundation. As a result of this epistemological goal, the sociological theorist's efforts are spent in discussions over the logical structure of sociological explanation, the nature of basic building blocks of social action and how and whether actions can coalesce to form social order, and the connections between agency and structure or micro and macro levels of analysis.

¹⁶Seidman's (1991a) postmodern epistemology—his combination of French postmodernism and American sociology—has generated much debate, beginning with an entire issue of *Sociological Theory* and a volume, edited by Wagner (1992) on *Postmodernism and Social Theory* and then part of another *Sociological Theory* issue (1992).

¹⁷Says Seidman (1991a:131), conjuring Derrida, postmodern methods are oriented to "deconstructing false closure, prying open present and future possibilities," and conjuring Foucault "detecting fluidity and porosity in forms of life where hegemonic discourses posit closure and a frozen order" (1991a:131). Finally, conjuring Lyotard: "The hope of a great transformation is replaced by the more modest aspirations of a relentless defense of immediate local pleasures and struggles for justice" (1991a:131).

¹⁸For Brown (1991, 1990), the narrative form allows self-reflexivity and recognition, in particular of the rhetorical aspects of the sociological enterprise. For Richardson (1991a, 1991b, 1988), narrative allows voices previously silenced to rise to the same epistemological prominence as previously dominant voices.

¹⁹The postmodern tendency to disrupt what seems normal or natural to reveal its social construction is a long-standing sociological orientation—Marx ([1867] 1967), Weber ([1904–1905] 2000), and Durkheim ([1893] 1984) all explored the social construction of capitalism. Marx ([1845–1846] 1970) also emphasized the social construction of knowledge, Weber ([1921] 1978) the social construction of economic and political forms like bureaucracy, and both Weber ([1904–1905] 2000) and Durkheim ([1912] 1995) revealed the social construction of religion.

the universalism/particularism dichotomy with a modernism/postmodernism contrast, because the particularism associated with postmodernity (with narrative social theory, for example) has always existed as a moment in modernity, as part of a larger dialectic.²⁰ We can see this modern emphasis on particularism in the hermeneutic tradition of Dilthey and then Gadamer,²¹ social phenomenologists and ethnomethodologists such as Schutz and O'Neill,²² Dewey and the pragmatic tradition,²³ and late 20th-century anthropologists and philosophers of science, such as Geertz and Kuhn. Each of these four traditions illustrates that particularism is part of a complex dialectic that is modernity and that we cannot use attention to particulars to differentiate modernity from postmodernity.

In addition, the supposedly postmodern need to respond to the uncertainty, fragmentation, and complexity of social knowledge has been recognized by sociologists in areas from communications studies²⁴ to organization studies.²⁵ The postmodernists today striving to describe social relations coordinated through technological media will find their projects not epistemologically different from those in communication studies who tried to describe social relations coordinated through symbolic communication (Smith 1995:57). The challenge of uncertainty is also dealt with by those who describe organizational functioning (Fuchs and Ward 1994). Relatedly, the uses of deconstructive methods that reveal the social construction of reality are argued to be "nothing new." Deconstruction, a relatively normal scientific method, is simply "the common and widespread practice of weakening the claims of one's opponents by distorting the social and cognitive networks that surround and strengthen these claims" (Fuchs and Ward 1994:482).²⁶ Epistemological awareness of the shifting and socially constructed nature of reality and drawing attention to this through deconstruction has been an important part of the sociological tradition.

To explain the seeming newness of the epistemological recognitions and new methodologies inherent in postmodernity, we might refer to the dilemma and distraction of epistemology. By this is meant the rhetorical strategies of postmodernists and their

²⁰If particularism can be located squarely within modernity, then so too can other epistemological postmodern traits. Difference, plurality, and multiple realities, frequently believed to be unique to postmodernity, have been ongoing features of modernity, specifically liberalism, whose attention to pluralism is arguably even more vigorous than postmodernity's defense of difference (Dzur 1998; Wagner 1992:468). In addition, destruction and fragmentation of the subject is not new. The critical tradition has long emphasized how the market, bureaucracies, and science alienate, subjugate, and instrumentalize, resulting in disciplined, multiply reduced objects without identity (Wagner 1992:469). Finally, attention to the irrational as the other side of reason (also an important postmodern trait) has been part of modernity: Rousseau, Goethe, the English romantic poets, moderns all, combined attention to the rational and the irrational (Calhoun 1991).

²¹Dilthey and Gadamer expounded on the personal and subjective roots of universalizing reason—the hermeneutic circle that constrains our understanding to our individual, subjective, personal situation.

²²Schutz and O'Neill emphasized the irreducibility of particular experience.

²³Dewey and the pragmatic tradition launched an attack against foundation building, against the ideal of objective subjects and universal knowledge, in favor of the particular, partial, and plural nature of knowledge.

²⁴Communications studies have resulted in awareness of the imperfections of representation and of the transitory nature of consensual meanings (Smith 1995). The tentative nature of human interaction creates problems for any sociologist trying to freeze-frame and describe how social relations are coordinated and social order achieved.

²⁵Both workers within organizations and sociologists of organization must note the chaos of human interaction, make assumptions, and define structures and modes of operation and communication.

²⁶Fuchs and Ward (1994) argue that whenever there is conflict, particularly over knowledge, whether in social science, humanities, law, or everyday interchanges, deconstruction comes into play. They suggest that deconstruction may involve four strategies for destabilizing existing meanings or arguments: rhetorical deconstruction or revealing stylistic strategies, ideological deconstruction or linking a position to a problematic school of thought, procedural deconstruction or targeting the method of criticism, and reputational deconstruction or critiquing the position through the person who constructed it.

commentators who have exaggerated both the universalistic, foundation-emphasizing tendencies of modernity²⁷ and, reciprocally, the fragmentation, dissolution, and incoherence of the postmodern experience.²⁸ These one-sided pictures make postmodernism stand out as different and as attractive. The dichotomy created by the exaggeration of modern epistemology and the reciprocal and dependent exaggeration of postmodern epistemology has been referred to as the “epistemological dilemma” (Alexander 1992).²⁹ According to this dilemma, we must either choose general sociological theory as the search for universality or decide that generality is impossible and remain within a particularistic and relativistic framework. The epistemological dilemma and the search for a way out have ended up distracting sociologists from the social, political, economic, and technological changes that might deserve to be called postmodern.

SOCIAL THEORY AND THE POSTMODERN WORLD

The balance of recent arguments leans to the pronouncement that postmodernism involves nothing new epistemologically, but that there is something unprecedented about the empirical world. As social scientists have noticed that their concepts no longer made sense of the world, they have asked themselves whether society has changed or whether their epistemologies and methods were flawed. Many have moved from the second question to the first. Thus, postmodern thinkers writing today within sociology are part of a broader movement of social theorists rediscovering how to connect macro theories with the empirical world. What Seidman and Alexander call a downward shift is one in which “theoretical concerns increasingly have become expressed in investigations of an empirical kind” (2001:3). Seidman and Alexander are optimistic that this new social theory can move easily between empirical and theoretical issues. Below I explore what might be called a downward shift in postmodern social theory: an empirical turn within postmodern thought that takes its researchers toward formulating middle-range theories and individual concepts to explain a changing social world. Most of the theories I discuss below share with the classic middle-range theories endorsed by Merton ([1949] 1968) a position in between grand theory and everyday working hypotheses and an ability to guide empirical inquiry.³⁰ It is the mobilization, creation, and development of these theories that I call empirical postmodernism.³¹

²⁷Critics have made this point of Seidman: “He treats modern theory too one-sidedly” (Antonio 1991:161).

²⁸“My own feeling is that . . . postmodern social theory is . . . exaggerating the break, rupture, and alleged novelty in the contemporary socio-historical period and is downplaying, and even occluding the continuities” (Kellner 1988:267). This point has also been made of Baudrillard: “Lacking adequate contextualization, his [Baudrillard’s] theory tends to be abstract, one-sided and rather blind to a large number of continuities between modernity and postmodernity and to a large number of depressing realities and problems in the present age” (Kellner 1988:248). It is argued that “[h]ere is no fundamentally new epistemological question” (Wagner 1992:483).

²⁹The epistemological dilemma “presents the fate of general theory as dependent upon an epistemological choice alone” (Alexander 1992:323).

³⁰Merton makes much of the point that “[m]iddle range theory is used principally in sociology to guide empirical inquiry” ([1949] 1968:39). As such, these theories have a number of characteristics. First they are relatively simple and they deal with a de-limited aspect of reality, such as the concepts of reference groups and role conflict. Second, they are provocative: they should generate theoretical problems and hypotheses that stimulate new research—in this way middle-range theories are a beginning rather than an end. Third, these new hypotheses and problems should point directly toward relevant empirical research.

³¹Empirical postmodernists are more of a group “in themselves” than a group “for themselves.” They are not a self-conscious set but rather independent thinkers with a set of shared characteristics: only a few have recognized their affinities and built upon them. This is an attempt to point to more such similarities among recent thinkers.

Empirical postmodernism is mobilized by the idea that there is something unique about contemporary conditions. This is a well-supported position (Smart 1996:56; Kumar 1995:185, 199–200; Lemert 1992:24; Antonio 1991:160; Gitlin 1989:317; Kellner 1988:258).³² Both theorists and sociologists more generally have called the changes that have taken place on the cusp of the 21st century “dramatic” (Seidman and Alexander 2001; Alexander 1995), “crucial” (Elliott and Turner 2001:1), “massive” (Pescosolido and Rubin 2000:52), “vertiginous” (Best and Kellner 2001:1) and, according to some, significant enough to be called “a new epoch” and “a new modernity” (Best and Kellner 2001:1; Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994). Fundamental sociological questions are raised by these changes: What kind of social and cultural world do we live in now? What are the nature of social life, the character of social interactions, and the structure of social institutions? What are the effects of these new social forms on individuals? Empirical postmodernism is born out of a sense that it might be useful to conceptualize these changes as Marx, Weber, and Durkheim did for the late 19th-century circumstances that gave birth to classical sociological theory.

The perception of social change fundamental to empirical postmodernism is compounded by the sense that neither social theory nor postmodern social theory has been particularly quick to respond to the challenges that a changing social world presents. Social theory seems, in the face of a changing social world, to continue gathering data using the old concepts and categories (Ritzer, Goodman, and Wiedenhof 2001:425; Beck 1994:3–4). According to some critics and some proponents of postmodernism as well, postmodernism has no substance, vision, or agenda and spawns no substantive research; instead, it seems to embrace chaos (Pescosolido and Rubin 2000:52)—it is just different voices at play (Allan and Turner 2000:364). But there is a growing sense that there are two postmodernisms: a skeptical one and an affirmative one (Rosenau 1992:42–61), a postmodern sociology and a sociology of postmodernity (Bauman 1992:26–27), a *zeitgeist* postmodernism and a grounded postmodernism (Crook 2001:310), an epistemological and an empirical postmodernism. There is a shared sense that postmodern slowness to respond to social changes is a result of being caught in epistemological questions, which have exhausted theoretical imaginations and reached the point of being immobilizing so that the moment is right for empirical engagement.

But along with a forward-looking gaze and determined empirical spirit, empirical postmodernists remain in touch with sociologically formative 19th-century thinkers. Dialogue with classical social theory results in new empirical postmodern theories forged in such a way to mend or provide alternatives to the shortcomings of the old theory in the context of contemporary changes. To flesh out the idea of empirical postmodernism, I concentrate on a few noteworthy and well-developed examples of the empirical postmodernist interrogation of classical social theory with the ideas of time-space reorganization, risk society, consumer capitalism, and post-modern ethics. It is noteworthy that these four postmodern ideas challenge four central themes of modern social theory: society as nation-state, industrialism, capitalism, and finally, how we think about social relations and social solidarity. I explore some of the new themes of empirical postmodernism, review their challenges to

³²One reason that we have not yet pinpointed what exactly is new empirically is that postmodernism, with its epistemological playfulness, was capable of making everything look new. When deconstructed, the usual looks unusual; in collage form the recognizable becomes strange. Postmodernism was capable of making us feel like we were living in the future; it is only recently that we have begun to assess what, given a temporarily stable perspective, actually seems to belong to the future.

existing social theory, and explore the new research agendas and concepts that are spawned.

Time-Space Reorganization

Thinkers such as Harvey, Giddens, and Jameson strengthen the case for an empirical turn in postmodern social theory. They argue that recent changes revolve around “profound processes of the reorganization of time and space” (Giddens 1991:2), and that these changes are epochal (Jameson 1991:3, 45; Harvey 1989:306), postmodern (Jameson 1991; Harvey 1989:773),³³ and empirically manifest (Jameson 1991:1). In Harvey’s terms, we are experiencing time-space compression; new technologies like flexible accumulation take production out of a centralized factory and distribute it worldwide; just-in-time production brings those far-flung products or parts to consumers or subcontractors quickly when needed. This spatiotemporal logic of post-Fordist capitalism collapses space and speeds up time, fragmenting social and cultural life in its wake.³⁴ For Giddens, focusing on individual experience, we are experiencing time-space distantiation: our lives are influenced by people who are physically absent and far away and, reciprocally, we have growing capacity to influence nonpresent far-away others.³⁵ In Jameson’s (1991:49) terms, we are experiencing a new global space, “a coherent new type of space in its own right” that characterizes multinational capitalism just as prior expansions of capitalism generated their own spatial dynamics. Jameson argues that this new space is empirically manifest (Portman’s disorienting Bonaventure Hotel serves as a sort of architectural analogy) but is still unexplored and untheorized.

Classical social theorists do thematize the particularities of modern space-time dynamics. Marx makes a theme of the increasing distance between action and effects as a characteristic distinguishing premodernity from modernity. Marx points out that in preindustrial society, a person would know his shoemaker by face while in industrial society a person not only could not trace the shoemaker but as thousands of shoes are manufactured through a division of labor in a factory, it might be said that there was no one individual who made the shoe. But in contemporary postmodern society, these labor processes are abstracted even further from individual relationships by computer-controlled manufacturing processes and distribution networks that cross many national boundaries. In addition, new technologies spread their effects far and wide in the form of acid rain and generation-crossing pharmaceuticals and pesticides. In each of these cases, consequences, such as the premodern or the modern shoemaker might never have imagined, are attached to the distance traversed by the product. According to empirical postmodernists, time-space reorganization has progressed further than Marx imagined and requires the conceptualizations of a new era.

³³Or in Giddens’s case, late modern.

³⁴Best and Kellner (2001) thematize the collapsing of space in science, referring to the miniaturized world of subatomic particles, genes, and strings in quantum mechanics, biotechnology, and superstring theory; in society, referring to cars and household appliances that function through microchips and the replacement of huge mainframes to handheld computers; in culture, referring to the miniaturization of media, video, and photographic techniques and our anxiety about such techniques in films such as *Honey I Shrank the Kids*.

³⁵In a time-space distantiated world, world production cycles affect us all economically in ways we cannot avoid and, in turn, our decision to buy a particular pair of shoes or a particular type of food may have worldwide ramifications. Giddens’s derivative concept is the “phantasmagoria” (Giddens 1990:19) of place meaning that space is torn from place.

Tracing these interconnections over time and space is a key project of postmodernists who engage self-consciously with the empirical world (Jameson 1991:1); their research questions trace the historical, material implications of the new constellations of time and space (Harvey 1989:306). Harvey asks about the potential of time-space reorganization on a new distinctive culture (1984:299), on a fragmented politics (1989:302), and, when it interacts with rapid currency flows, on intensified social power (1989:298). Giddens (1990) asks about the effects of time-space distantiation at the macro level on large-scale organizations: What are the reverberations on systems of production, on the nation-state, and on the global distribution of power, including the global military order? At the micro level, Giddens (1992, 1991) asks how time-space distantiation has affected our more intimate relationships, in particular our ability for trust³⁶ and pure relationships,³⁷ that is, the relationship itself, rather than place to bind us together? Finally, Jameson's research program focuses directly on the unknown qualities of postmodern space as its fundamental organizing concern. He sees the new research agenda as mapping, that is, rethinking the way we conceptualize postmodern social as well as physical space, and how we conceive our individual relationships to local, national, international, and class realities to regain our capacity to act and struggle.

Perhaps the most prominent example of time-space reorganization is globalization, which has fueled a research agenda of its own. Simply, globalization means that a range of social processes have become more interconnected around the world—as space has collapsed and time has sped up, there have been increasing flows of people, money, information, and even diseases across national borders. One of the most influential social theoretical works on globalization as a large-scale postmodern transformation is Hardt and Negri's (2000) *Empire*. An important research question catalyzed by this work is whether the globalization that characterizes postmodernity involves a single logic or rule that operates as a "rhizomatic" formation spreading itself worldwide, taking over other cultures and leaving room for only a politics of what Hardt and Negri call "being against?" Or is globalization really globalizations made up of a variety of different projects, alternative forms, which "clash with each other in varying degrees and combine in different ways in different places" (Calhoun 2002b:9)? One of the most influential empirical events to renew basic questions on globalization was September 11. Researchers reposed issues like: What is the new shape of violence in a global world? What are the features of the "new wars" that stand out post-September 11, including new kinds of enemies with new weapons and strategies like "mimetic" wars with battles of images and representations (Der Derian 2002; Goldstone 2002; Kaldor 2002)? How should we deal with governance "hot spots" around the globe (Sassen 2002)? What is the role, if any, for global institutions of law and justice (Held 2002)? How are we able to handle threats from within our borders and maintain our level of democracy (Benhabib 2002)?

Another example of time-space reorganization is new communications technology like the Internet with its different forms from LISTSERVS to the worldwide web

³⁶In societies in which "relationships with those who are physically absent and increasingly distant" are more and more likely, in which place is "phantasmagoric" (Giddens 1990:19), we need to increasingly rely on "trust" (Giddens 1990, 1994b) to bind us together for the systems of finance, of law, of medicine, of everyday communication, and transportation to work. Trust, of course, is not a new concept; we are talking of an intensification of an existing concept as indeed we are with time-space distantiation.

³⁷Giddens is optimistic too that as both place and those things that usually adhere to place like kinship, social duty, or traditional obligation become less binding, individuals will have the ability to enter into "pure relationships" (Giddens 1992:6, 1991:58), "relationships solely for the relationships themselves, for whatever rewards the relationships offer" (1991:6).

to electronic mail to personal websites to electronic conference proceedings, electronic journals, electronic data sets, and Internet books that contribute to time-space compression, time-space distanciation, new global space, and globalization in ways that sociologists are only beginning to explore. Indeed, the Internet is a key, but undertheorized and underresearched, feature of postmodernity, making it a challenge to empirical postmodernists (Calhoun 2002b:1; Dimaggio et al. 2001:329; Wellman 1997:445). Research questions posed by the Internet concern its social implications, especially its implications for social change. What is the nature of online communities? Will the Internet destroy community altogether or create new types and forms of community without regard to race, gender, creed, or geography? Can we have communities not based on space but on information, a virtual community? How do online experiences affect identity? Relationships? Perception? What are the impacts of these new technologies on work? Do they differ from the impact of the car, train, phone, and plane? One of the foremost thinkers on the Internet, Castells (1998, 1997, 1996) emphasizes the epochal nature of the new information age and society. Castells describes how the speed and global scope of informationalism has led to the inception of "the network society" and has virtualized phenomena like dating, sex, commerce, shopping, learning, medicine, and counseling.

Risk Society

If new concepts of time and space challenge classical social theoretical ideas about society as defined by the borders of the nation-state, risk society sees limits to the idea of society as industrial. Like theorists of the new time-space constellations, theorists of risk society believe that there has been a significant transition in contemporary society, a movement from "industrial society" to "risk society" that gives support to the idea that we are living in a postmodern or late modern society. "Risk society" is associated most strongly with Beck (1999, 1994, 1992), who wrote a book with this title, but also with Giddens (1994b, 1994c) and others who have developed it (Boyne 2003; Lash, Szerszynski, and Wynne 1996; Douglas 1992). It is important to note that by risk society it is not necessarily meant that social life is inherently more risky than it once was (people in the developed world have longer life expectancies than their ancestors, reflecting in many ways less risky lives), but rather that risk has entered new arenas of our social lives so that social actors think about and organize the world in terms of risk. According to Beck, there are two stages in the emergence of risk society. The first is one in which the dangers produced by industrial society increasingly escape the institutions created by industrial society to monitor and protect against them but few are aware of them. The second stage is an ideological one in which these risks come to dominate public and private conflicts and debates. It is in this latter stage, according to Beck, that awareness of risk has arisen and hence the need to replace the concept of industrial society with risk society becomes clear.

Classical social theorists did not explore risk society as they did time-space reorganization. Beck and Giddens both point out that neither Marx nor Weber foresaw risk society. Marx did view industrial capitalism as ultimately doomed but, according to Beck, he failed to see that it was the side effects of the successes of industrial capitalism that would produce the new social and political form—in Beck's (1994:2) terms, "it is not the crises, but I repeat the victories of capitalism which produce the new social form." Industrial capitalistic society is sliding into its successor, risk society, through more of the same, more dangerous industrial processes. Similarly, according to Beck, Weber's theory has no room for the

conceptualization of risk; in particular, Weber's argument about an increasingly instrumental rational society is at odds with the character of risk. Risk is not instrumentally rational in the sense that it is not amenable to means-end thinking, prediction, and other expert-led processes—the usual government, market, and technological processes of a modern society—and Weber does not provide any other conceptual categories to thematize risk.

Recent empirical events associated with September 11 have dramatized the risky elements of contemporary postmodern society and exploded them into the collective consciousness. “The attack dramatized a threat we had been complacently ignoring and demanded new vigilance from us. We had been ‘innocent’ and now we needed to be ‘realistic.’ The world was a dangerous place” (Calhoun, Price, and Timmer 2002:2). Commentators on risk after September 11 have emphasized, like theorists of risk society, the ideological impact of September 11: September 11 did not so much add to the riskiness of society but rather crystallized existing awareness of risk. Ongoing issues like the vulnerabilities of our air travel, water supplies, mail delivery, energy production, public health system, and finance system, and the weakness of government preparedness for disaster, infiltrate into political debates and influence individual thinking. Military strategists had been raising questions about the threats to “homeland security” for quite some time, but these only commanded attention after September 11.

Risk society also spearheads an ongoing empirical research agenda, an agenda further developed by September 11. Three sorts of research questions are asked. The first set relates to the ways in which risk society has affected society's relationship to class, status, sex roles, the nuclear family, occupations, business sectors, and now, after September 11, religion.³⁸ For example, the ever-growing awareness of risk has led to new ideas of stratification according to which the competition over goods (income, jobs, and social security) is increasingly supplemented by the competition over the risks accompanying goods production or “bads” (Beck 1994:6) (nuclear waste dumps and other environmental threats, side effects of nuclear and chemical mega-technology, side effects of genetic research and genetic modifications of food and other crops). The second set of research questions asks how society deals with these risks legally and politically given that old principles of guilt, responsibility, and polluter pays seem no longer helpful in a world where risks are risky—uncertain, unpredictable, and difficult to attribute. Post-September 11, a new legal and political question arises: How should the tension between civil liberties and effective law enforcement be managed in a risky world? Is there a place for military tribunals, large-scale uses of detention without customary due process, and racial or ethnic profiling in existing justice systems? The third regards the effect on individuals—How have individuals released from the relative certainties of industrial society come to cope with contemporary uncertainties, particularly relevant in “code orange” post-September 11 American society? In other words, risk society raises not just the usual public sphere questions of freedom and equality and how we will maximize each, but private sphere questions about how we will reproduce, what will our children look like, and how will we live safely in our surroundings. Here, biotechnology (genetic engineering of crops, trees, and grasses, pharming, stem cell research, laboratory-grown organs, xenotransplantation, organ markets, hand and forearm transplants, oncomouse, and biosteel) is also important. Giddens (1991:209–23) calls the new

³⁸In particular, how has risk society affected cultural attitudes toward religion, both as a threat and as a charitable response toward emergency?

politics “life politics” to contrast it with the previous emancipative politics and to emphasize the intimate nature of the questions.³⁹ Beck (1994:17–23, 38–40) calls the new politics “subpolitics” to emphasize the private sphere aspects of contemporary risk. These concepts are useful for exploring the surprising mobilization of citizen groups, some call them new social movements, on the issues of environment, globalization, and biotechnology.

Consumer Capitalism

The theory of consumer capitalism focuses on what its proponents perceive as significant qualitative changes since 19th-century classical sociology: consumption has replaced production as the salient principle of postmodern society, and consumption itself has changed from its modern forms. As Gottdiener says: “Although the broad outlines of capitalist society remain, fundamental shifts have occurred that require study” (2000a:x). Two significant sociological changes are afoot: first individual identities are increasingly dependent on consumption choices and, second, social organization is increasingly defined by modes of distribution—McDonalds and Disney—rather than modes of production. Ultimately, consumption and production are two sides of the same coin (Ritzer, Goodman, and Wiedenhof 2001; Gottdiener 2000a, 2000b) but, according to theorists writing in the empirical postmodern spirit, the growing role that consumption plays in this dialectic has been neglected.

Classical social theorists and their progeny were not unaware of the consumption side of modern capitalism, though there is some debate over the usefulness of modern theories of consumption in a postmodern world. Some argue that Marx theorized consumption well using concepts like commodities and commodity fetishism and that these concepts are as useful today as they were more than 100 years ago (Gottdiener 2000a:4). Others point out that although Marx theorized consumption,⁴⁰ he did not theorize means of consumption as different from objects of consumption, and never saw consumption as central as production to identity (Ritzer, Goodman, and Wiedenhof 2001).⁴¹ Weber and Durkheim are even more limited in their theorizations of consumption: Weber’s conception of consumption was never central to identity or social organization, and Durkheim did not theorize consumption at all.⁴² In contrast, building on classical social theory, the Frankfurt School (for example,

³⁹As Beck (1994:45–46) puts it, “the most general and the most intimate things are directly and inescapably interconnected in the depths of private life. Private life becomes in essence the plaything of scientific results and theories, or of public controversies and conflicts. The questions of a distant world of chemical formulas burst forth with deadly seriousness in the inmost recesses of personal life conduct as questions of self, identity, and existence cannot be ignored. In global risk society, then, privacy, as the smallest conceivable unity of the political contains world society, to use the image of the Russian dolls once again. The political nestles down in the middle of private life and torments us.”

⁴⁰Marx ([1867] 1967) theorizes consumption in *Capital* where he defines commodities as the reduction of use value to exchange value, and in *Gundrisse* (Marx [1857–1858] 1974) where he is concerned with the dialectical relation between production and consumption.

⁴¹Marx ([1932] 1978:103) facetiously commented on the possibility that consumption could contribute to identity in what has become a classic passage: “Thus what I *am* and *am capable* of is by no means determined by my individuality. I am ugly, but I can buy for myself the most *beautiful* of women. Therefore I am not *ugly* . . . I, in my character as an individual, am *lame*, but money furnishes me with twenty-four feet. Therefore I am not *lame*. I am bad, dishonest, unscrupulous, stupid, but money is honoured and therefore so is its possessor.”

⁴²Weber ([1904–1905] 2000) also theorized consumption, but as an evil, a “turpitude” that Calvinism repressed; all luxuries were condemned in favor of saving and investment, and consumption was never as central to identity as hard work in a calling, a thesis at odds with today’s capitalistic dependence on the excitation of consumption. Durkheim, of course, never addressed the issue of consumption directly, though his conceptualizations like collective representations are useful for understanding the significance of mass consumption.

Adorno [1991] 2001; Horkheimer and Adorno [1944] 1972; Marcuse 1964) highlighted consumption, particularly the consumption of art and music in the “culture industry”, (Horkheimer and Adorno [1944] 1972) as a significant opportunity for greater instrumentally rational capitalist control and manipulation. But, critics argue that this one-dimensional view neglects the ways that contemporary consumption can assume multiple forms that may be a source of pleasure and identity. Perhaps the most useful body of work in the modern Marxist tradition is Baudrillard’s early work on consumption, which, as we will see, gives us some useful concepts.

According to theorists of consumer capitalism (Ritzer, Goodman, and Wiedenhof 2001; Gottdiener 2000a), postmodern consumer society differs in important ways from modern consumer society. The multiple forms of postmodern consumption include objects of consumption as always, but proliferating in a postmodern world are two important developments: first, new subjects of consumption as mentioned above, and second, new sites and processes of consumption. According to theorists of consumer capitalism, the Frankfurt School was wrong: consumers in a postmodern world are not dupes of the consumption society, but actively appropriate consumer objects and culture propagated through advertising and image production to create complex and multiple consumer identities and new social groupings or neotribes. Second, sites and processes of consumption have been extended in a postmodern world. Casino gambling, theme parks, cybermalls, cruise ships, themed restaurants, and the spectacles that define them provide people with greater opportunities to consume and to consume in ways that are experienced as aesthetically positive and fun. Indeed, some have argued that consumption in postmodern society has reenchanting daily life and made it fun (Baudrillard [1968] 1996) and childlike with its “logic of Father Christmas” (Baudrillard [1968] 1996) by infusing it with new symbols and new, albeit perhaps superficial, meaning.

Research on consumption thus takes place in four main areas (Ritzer, Goodman, and Wiedenhof 2001): objects of consumption, subjects of consumption, sites of consumption, and processes of consumption. Investigators ask what are the objects of consumption and what do they symbolize? Do they even operate as signs or have they lost connections with systems of signifiers to become free floating? Sex, for example, has come to mean nothing and everything or whatever it is associated with. Similarly, who are the subjects of consumption? If we do have subjects of consumption, rather than dupes in a system of consumption, can we define consumption as a new realm of freedom and identity construction? Is it possible to have a revolutionary class of consumers? What are the new sites of consumption and what differentiates them from traditional sites of consumption? And, what are the new processes of consumption that complement these new sites? How have socioeconomic and historical forces affected the growth of these sites and processes? And, how do these new sites and processes affect our social relations? Thinkers who ask these questions point out that each is “an empirical question in need of investigation rather than a theoretical assumption . . . from which a study of consumers can begin” (Ritzer, Goodman, and Wiedenhof 2001:421).

Finally, as empirical postmodernists, theorists of consumer capitalism forge new concepts to make sense of this changed empirical world. One of the most fruitful concepts to emerge from empirical investigations of consumer capitalism is that of the tourist, an archetype that has surfaced empirically and that spawns further research in each of the areas above. Tourism symbolizes the changes we have experienced from production to consumption: the tourist is defined by his or her liberation from the world of work and his or her reoccupation with the world of consumption. The tourist

redefines our sites of consumption, including cities, many of which are recovering from de-industrialization to find new life in developing the museums, hotels, theaters, and restaurants that attract the consumption dollars of tourists. Other newly tourist-centered sites of consumption include the rainforest, catering to the ecotourist (Rojek 2000), the less developed world of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, catering to the sex tourist (Mullings 2000), and the “holy sites” of the Middle East, catering to the religious tourist (Shoval 2000). Tourism also redefines our subjectivity; even those of us who do not travel are trained increasingly in the “tourist gaze” and in the tourist attitude toward life in which people can momentarily become involved and then distanced from lifestyles and cultural practices on both a local and a global level (Bauman 1998, 1997). New subjects of consumption are complemented by new processes of consumption, like McDonaldization and Disneyfication that structure the tourist experience at home and abroad. Objects of consumption that increasingly command both the tourist and the nontourist dollar (in addition to the commodification of sex and religion mentioned above) include the growing commodification of sports (Bramlett and Sloan 2000) and the “hypercommodification” of rock music in the rock concert (Seiler 2000).

Postmodern Ethics

Another empirical turn in postmodern thinking has been in its attitude toward morality and ethics. Morality and ethics, it is commonly agreed, have generally resurfaced as important theoretical themes (Seidman and Alexander 2001) characterized by a marked “downward shift.” “What we mean by this [downward shift] is that these theories now explicitly find their justification in connections to broader intellectual traditions and to the moral urgencies of political life” (Seidman and Alexander 2001:3), a connection that “will not only make sociology more publicly useful but intellectually stronger” (Calhoun 2002a:2). Participating in this downward shift, postmodern ethics has seen two sorts of changes. First, it embraces a project of ethics, a rejection of morality in its Kantian sense of a systematized approach to pressing questions, in favor of an ethics that replaces formality with practicality and focuses on the autonomous individual as the source of those ethics. The central sociological theorist of postmodern ethics, Zygmunt Bauman,⁴³ can be seen as the culmination of a broader social theoretical movement (from Rawls to Walzer to later Rawls to McIntyre to Bauman) toward a more applied ethics. Second, postmodern ethics stresses the inception of new ethical questions and problems characterizing a postmodern epoch: Bauman is in agreement with Giddens that in a complex postmodern society, “new ethical spaces are opened up and political perplexities created” (Giddens 1994c:190). Postmodern ethics challenges how we think about our social relations (and what makes them legitimate) in a new, risky, time-space distantiated consumer society.

Classical social theorists consistently thematized issues of value, from Marx who looked for a system of values outside bourgeois capitalism, to Weber for whom the demise of values, the tragic disenchantment of the world, presented a challenge, to Durkheim who searched for new forms of moral regulation and integration in an individualized world. But, according to Bauman, the modern projects of morality were flawed. Modern elites—philosophers and legislators including the classical social

⁴³Bauman (1997, 1995, 1993, 1992) has self-identified as postmodern, not least by the titles of four books that will figure in this analysis. His concerns are both epistemological, to pinpoint a postmodern sociological approach that differs from modern methodologies, and empirical, to engage with the changed postmodern world, both to describe it and demonstrate opportunities to be moral in complex, postindustrial, risk-dominated conditions.

theorists Marx, Weber, and Durkheim as well as the modern political theorists Hobbes and Kant—sought a universal, founded, rational morality that Bauman suggests operated in elite interests and disenfranchised the rest who lost their individual initiative and ability to act morally. “The state has a . . . soporific effect on moral conscience” (Bauman 1993:183). Nowhere was this truer than in Nazi Germany, according to Bauman (1989), where rationality banded effectively with centralized political power to create a modern bureaucratic form of extermination wordlessly agreed to by thousands.

In addition, according to Bauman, the modern project of morality is flawed in an empirically new postmodern world. What sorts of ethics do we use in a time-space reorganized and risky world when we are creating not just shoes at long distance, as Marx foreshadowed, but dangerous products or the technology to create dangerous products, like pesticides and pharmaceuticals, so that our actions traverse distance and time heavy with the potential weight of disaster? What sorts of ethics do we use when these long-distance dangers are one-sided, that is, when those in command—of a factory, a weapons system, a consumer item—and those who are potentially threatened—neighbors, workers, consumers, clients—do not present reciprocal dangers? How can we meet the demand in a newly risk aware, post-September 11 age to provide new legal, ethical, and political principles where risks are risky, that is, uncertain, unpredictable, and difficult to attribute and old principles no longer apply? And what sorts of ethics will allow us to see individuals not as consumer capitalism’s passive dupes but as active in the creation of themselves and their ethics?

Bauman’s (1993) new ethical concepts: “being-for,” “face,” “sobering up,” and “proximity” locate postmodern ethics squarely in the presocial individual and are useful in conceptualizing one-sided, risky, long-distance social relations. According to the concept of “being-for”: “I am for the other whether the other is for me or not; his being for me is, so to speak, his problem, and whether and how he ‘handles’ that problem does not in the least affect my being-for him . . . whatever else ‘I-for-you’ may contain, it does not contain a demand to be repaid, mirrored or ‘balanced out’ in the ‘you-for-me’” (1993:50). The notion of the presociality of morality is continued in the concept of “face.” Face is only encountered if there is no expectation of response. An encounter with face cannot depend on the other’s past, present, or anticipated future reciprocation; to do so would constitute a kind of heteronomy or morality from outside. It is the act of attempting to “imagine” this preontological state and of conceiving oneself as a fundamentally moral being that is finally important: Bauman calls this “sobering up.” What is born out of sobering up or awakening is a moral state, which Bauman refers to as “proximity,” a presocial moral closeness between two individuals. The nonreciprocity of “being-for” and “face” is useful in an asymmetrically time-space distantiated and compressed society involving one-sided long-distance dangers that put the onus and responsibility directly on the autonomous individual who cannot expect a response from a vulnerable weak or relatively powerless Other whether in slums of Bhopal, in rural Virginia, or among the yet unborn.⁴⁴

⁴⁴Long-distance relationships between unequals include those that existed between manufacturers of Agent Orange and the soldiers and citizens in Vietnam and, we now discover, their offspring, who of course were not equally dangerous to the manufacturers. Similarly, the owners and managers of Union Carbide, it turned out, were creating a risk for the workers and neighbors of their Bhopal plant and its sister plant in West Virginia unlike any these workers and neighbors presented to them. Bauman (1993:219) describes the one-sidedness of these relationships and says: “They are not exchanges; they cannot be, therefore, limited or regulated or otherwise kept in the frame of contracts, by a mutual show of force, by negotiation or the search for consensus.” Says Bauman (1993:218): “Morality which has always guided us and still guides us today has powerful but short hands. It now needs very, very long hands indeed. What chance of growing them?”

The “ethics of imagination” resulting in “sobering up” is appropriate for describing a moral response to and moral principles for risky social relations involving uncertainty and unpredictability. Finally, their location squarely in an autonomous individual connects with postmodern consumer capitalist and other postmodern theories that stress just that.

Uncertainty

Together, empirical postmodernists call into question or modify the central themes of classical social theory and modernity. Key dimensions of modern society, axes around which modern society is organized and defined, like the nation-state, industrial society, classical capitalism, and social relations of morality, are challenged by empirical postmodern concepts like time-space distantiation, risk society, consumer capitalism, and postmodern ethics. Each of these theories rests easily with Merton’s ([1949] 1968) notion of middle-range theory: they are relatively simple and they inspire new research agendas and provocative concepts. But, is there any difference between the empirically-based theories and concepts of the modern age and those of the postmodern age? It turns out there is. Social science is not quite the same in the postmodern age; the effects of epistemological postmodern are, if no longer debated as hotly, still very much with us. In particular, there is a pervading sense of uncertainty about the social world, about us as individuals, in our concepts, and in our attitudes toward our concepts. The idea of an increasingly uncertain social world is perhaps best captured conceptually by Giddens’s (1990) term *juggernaut*, which describes the contemporary world as swept by a massive inexorable force that crushes whatever is in its path, fostering change at a faster, wider pace than ever before, carrying us, almost powerless, along. The idea that we as individuals are less certain is reflected in an idea, shared by Giddens and Beck, of “disembedding” (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994), referring to the decreasing relevance of modern traditions (fueled in large part by the most recent wave of the women’s movement), requiring individuals to invent their families, their careers, and their sexualities and to integrate all into a not necessarily coherent and continually reflective self. This uncertainty is thematized by the concepts themselves: consumer capitalism is a more uncertain capitalism as it depends on the whim of the consumer rather than the predictable logic of the profit-making producer; risk society thematizes as-if thinking, including unreliable experts acting on the basis of a future seen less and less clearly; time-space distantiation reflects the uncertainty of the world in which the effects of our actions are rendered almost invisible by their distance from us in time and space; and postmodern ethics is an uncertain ethics that revolves around a presocial, preontological ethics of imagination. The idea that our “commitment to our concepts” is also less certain is captured by the notion of reflexive modernity, shared by Giddens, Beck, and Lash, thematizing the idea that everything is always open to reflection including reflection itself. The hope is that with an agility fostered by these fundamental uncertainties of society, self, and concept, we may succeed in conceptualizing new changes even as they happen quickly upon us.

CONCLUSION

The hope of this analysis is that the formulation of the terms epistemological postmodernism and empirical postmodernism will draw attention to these contributions

of postmodernism to sociology. Sociological encounters with the postmodern have involved two moments, both significant for the discipline. Epistemological postmodernism represents the postmodern concern with knowledge: the difficulties of attaining knowledge because of the assumption-bound nature of science, the difficulties of communicating knowledge because of representational quality of the language we use to describe it, and the difficulties generally in the search for universal, well-founded truths. While sociological responses to epistemological postmodernism have ranged from accusations of nihilism to “nothing new,” we can say, more positively, that social theory has gained from epistemological postmodernism a fundamental modesty. The possible sources of this modesty are many: Foucault’s more tentative methods of archaeology and genealogy; Lyotard’s paradoxical and contradictory language games; and Baudrillard’s object-centered knowledge. As a result of an encounter with any or all of these epistemological postmodernists, social theorists are newly aware of the probabilistic, assumption-based, and complex nature of the knowledge we collect, create, and disseminate.⁴⁵ What we get as a result of postmodern epistemology, then, is a more open, modest, and contextual discipline.

The second moment, empirical postmodernism, leaves behind debates about knowledge, at least temporarily, to try to grasp a changing social world. Thinkers such as Harvey, Jameson, Giddens, Beck, Ritzer, Bauman, and others thematize past inattention to the empirical world to motivate a reengagement with it and a reinterrogation of existing concepts of classical sociological theory. The contributions of empirical postmodernism to sociology have been significant. First, social theorists have deepened their research agenda beyond some of the admittedly sketchy and generalized themes of early postmodernism to rethink society’s borders, industrialism, capitalism, and social relations: four key themes of modern social theory. New themes like time-space distanciation, risk society, consumer capitalism, and postmodern ethics give us an ability to continue to conceptualize the rapidly changing social world and to spawn new research here. Empirical postmodernism contributes an edge or a boost and a relevance and an excitement, a vim and a vigor that social theory has feared losing.

A second contribution of empirical postmodernism is its ability to help us to see into the future. It has already been recognized that postmodernism might be useful in seeing the past:

The real contribution that the idea of the postmodern has made to social theory has been its interrogation of modernity as a category of history and society . . . the defining contours of modernity emerge more sharply, like the skyline of a city seen from kilometers away . . . [or] the boundaries of modernity become blurred as we move away, like Los Angeles seen from the air on a smoggy day. (Crook 2001:318)

While postmodern social theory, like modern social theory, has limits in predicting what is to come, its concepts can give us images and glimpses of our new lives as consumers and tourists, living in a risky, globalized society but one in which we can increasingly fashion our identities and rethink the possibilities of individual morality. For some theorists, the additional hope is that writing about such issues can propel us

⁴⁵We see this modesty not only in Beck, Lash, and Giddens’s concept of reflexive modernization and in Bauman’s concept of ambiguity, but in thinkers who do not identify directly with the modern-postmodern debate such as feminists, symbolic interactionists, Bourdieu, and others.

there. According to Giddens, the postmodern world is a desirable one, characterized by postscarcity, increasingly multilayered democratization, demilitarization, and the humanization of technology. This positive view of postmodernism is shared by Anderson (1998) who sees it as preparing the way for a more democratic culture. The aspiration of the double hermeneutic (Giddens 1987) is that sociologists writing about a postmodern world may inspire the inhabitants of that world (the subjects of our sociology) to internalize these concepts and create a world in their image.

A third contribution involving the interpenetration of epistemological and empirical postmodernism to sociology is to prompt us to return to modern themes, to use our newly gained epistemological postmodern modesty and our grounded empirical postmodern surefootedness to return to the modern.⁴⁶ First, we can reappropriate enlightenment aspirations. For example, even Bauman (1992:86), an explicitly self-avowed postmodernist, still places hope in the striving for freedom, and he argues that sociologists should not abandon the “enlightenment dream of the meeting of rational minds” while simultaneously keeping postmodern tentativeness central.⁴⁷ Second, postmodernism helps us return to modern concepts: we can explore the ways in which the modern participates in the postmodern (the postmodern is made up of vestiges of things in the background of the modern) and the postmodern grows out of the modern. For example, bureaucracy (a Weberian modern concept) organizes consumption (a postmodern theme) as much as it did production (a modern theme).⁴⁸ Finally, a combination of epistemological and empirical postmodernism allows us to continue sociology’s search for generalization. An important purpose of sociology, as Mills ([1959] 2000) pointed out, is to connect the particular to broad social forces. Postmodern forces, being both larger in scale and more intrusive into the particular, dramatically require the sociological imagination. Sociology’s search for generalization, if not universalism, is not changed, just tempered.

From postmodernism, seen as a combination of epistemological and empirical moments, we get the ability to continue living modern lives: making hypotheses, collecting data, and drawing conclusions, given backbone and confidence by sets of new conceptual tools and also a renewed modesty about the absoluteness of our findings or conclusions. We have always bracketed our shortcomings and our blind spots to get on with the business at hand. This combined postmodernism has given us the ability to recognize, acknowledge, and even thematize these shortcomings and still get on. We are newly epistemologically aware that our findings about the empirically new world are single moments or perspectives in what is, after all, the collective and dialogical project of contemporary social theory and sociology.

⁴⁶By returning to the modern, I do not mean, as Calhoun (1995) does, leaving behind the “pseudohistorical” postmodern to incorporate its insights into a richer conceptualization of modernity. My argument is that projects like those of Beck, Giddens, and Bauman have, over the last few years, concretized postmodernism sufficiently that it has assumed the contours of a historical epoch. Thus, I suggest that we accept the existence of both the modern and the postmodern to formulate a fuller approach to the contemporary social world.

⁴⁷Our simultaneous epistemological modesty and empirical surefootedness are what allow us to continue both living in and studying modern institutions of education, health, justice, and others with their images of due process, enablement, and efficiency—while thematizing the limits and failures of these promises.

⁴⁸Look at shopping mall techniques: they depend upon calculable, efficient, and predictable (modern) bureaucratic systems to order and price products, to organize them on the shelves, to ring them up for the customers. Of course, everything from McDonald’s to Jiffy Lube is bureaucratized. The uncertainty or modesty about our concepts, the awareness of conceptual limits, is a core contribution of epistemological postmodernism as it allows us to move easily between modern and new, empirically discovered, postmodern concepts.

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