PART 1

Postmodernism and Organization Theory

1

The Idea of the Postmodern

> It is strong and fashionable. Over and above this, it is not altogether clear what the devil it is. In fact, clarity is not conspicuous amongst its marked attributes. (Gellner, 1992: 22)

> Postmodernism is a theory, a contemporary practice and a condition of the contemporary era. In short we live and breathe it. (Sardar, 1998: 27)

What Hans Bertens (1995: 3) has referred to as the 'idea of the postmodern', remains one of the most contested and, as Bertens himself describes it, 'exasperating' ideas currently circulating within the contemporary social sciences. This exasperation is helped little by the emergence of two parallel tendencies. On the one hand, almost every commentator on the subject seems to offer his or her own particular definition or conceptualization. On the other, many writers, whose ideas have generally been associated with the postmodern canon, have frequently been at pains to eschew the term and any identification of their work with it. Nevertheless, what Bertens also suggests is that postmodernism is an idea with a history, a history within which a number of common propositions about the nature of contemporary industrialized societies, and the ideas that we hold about them, have evolved.

Taking this as our starting point, in this opening chapter we provide a relatively brief introduction to some of these common propositions in order to contextualize our subsequent consideration of the impact of postmodernism

on contemporary organization theory. In some respects, this has been made easier for us by the fact that attempts by those who study organizations to engage with the implications of postmodernism have generally tended to focus fairly specifically on the writing of a limited number of individuals. These are most notably Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard. As we noted however, such individuals have not always identified either themselves or their ideas with postmodernism as such. Nevertheless, they have come to be regarded as providing the intellectual framework for postmodern thought and have, in turn, significantly influenced the incorporation of the idea of the postmodern into the domain of organization theory.

Commencing with an introductory discussion of the concepts of ***modernization***, ***modernism*** and ***modernity***,[1] particularly in relation to Cooper and Burrell's (1988) conceptual bifurcation of what they term systemic and critical modernism, the chapter then proceeds to a critical overview of a number of the key ideas associated with several leading postmodern meta-theorists. We use the term 'meta-theory' here to denote theoretical activity which, rather than aiming to theorize about particular social forms or specific cultural phenomena, is directed towards the activity of theorizing about theory itself (Morrow and Brown, 1994). As such, it is something of an umbrella term covering issues of ontology (the study of the nature of the world), epistemology (the study of knowledge), and normative theory (the study of how the world ought to be). Because these are all themes that postmodern discourse tends to integrate, the term 'meta-theory' seems – to us at least – to be a particularly useful one.

We then turn our attention, in the penultimate section of the chapter, to a related but distinct body of writing. One that has, on the whole, sought to develop not so much a postmodern meta-theory, but rather a social scientific analysis of contemporary western societies, which posits a process of socio-cultural postmodernization. Here we consider the work of a range of contemporary cultural theorists such as Baudrillard (1981, 1990), Harvey (1989), Jameson (1991) and Lash (1990) who have, in various ways, explored the imperatives underpinning, and the implications of, the emergence of postmodernity as a relatively novel set of cultural and, indeed, organizational phenomena. In the concluding section we reflect critically on this material in an attempt to evaluate its implications for the practice of organization theory.

The Enlightenment: cradle of the modern

As Cahoone has noted, 'any discussion of postmodernism assumes a great deal of knowledge about modernism or modernity, or the modern world, or how it has been interpreted' (1996: ix). Certainly for us, any attempt to provide an overview of the ideas and practices that have come to be termed 'postmodern' requires at least a cursory exploration of that which

postmodernism claims to have transcended, rejected or replaced, namely *the modern*. In some ways, however, it was only with the advent of the idea of the postmodern that many social scientists began to reflect seriously on the experience of modernity.[2] Prior to this, the modern was something that had been largely taken for granted. To be modern was to be concerned with the issues of the present, while looking towards the promise of progress in the future. In what has perhaps been one of the most influential and reflexive descriptions of what it is to live in the modern world, Marshall Berman declared:

> There is a mode of vital experience – experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life's possibilities and perils – that is shared by men and women all over the world today. I will call this body of experience 'modernity'. To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world and, at the same time, threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. (1983: 15)

While vulnerable to a number of criticisms, not least that such a generalization ignores a range of factors which may well ensure that the possibility of 'adventure, power, joy, growth, [and] transformation' is far from a universally shared experience, this is a powerful and evocative image of what it perhaps means to be modern. Yet where does this mode of experience originate? What demarcates it from the pre-modern, and why should we now consider that we have, in some way, transcended it?

While still contested both historically and philosophically, it is now broadly agreed upon that the modern age, as we have come to understand it, took shape sometime around the mid-eighteenth century.[3] This was the culmination of a period of intense intellectual activity, one which had taken place across Europe over a 150-year period from the mid-seventeenth century onwards, and which has since come to be known as the European Enlightenment.[4] Based on Robert Hollinger's (1994: 7) concise summary, what has come to be known as the *Enlightenment project* can be condensed into the following principal ideas:

1 To be human means to be bound by universal, rational and moral principles that bind all human beings into a universal humanity and which provide guidance on conduct and judgement.
2 Only a society based on science and universal values is truly free and rational.
3 Knowledge is constituted by a set of beliefs that all human beings can assent to rationally; that is, on the basis of a universally valid set of methodological assumptions.
4 The more we know about ourselves and the world we inhabit, the better human life will become, because ignorance is the cause of unhappiness and immorality.

Underpinning these beliefs in the nature of reality and our potential for knowledge of it was the philosophical disposition that we know today as *humanism*; a belief in the faculty of human reason and agency as the keys to unlocking, and bringing under the domain of a unified humanity, all the mysteries of the natural and social universe. In short, the Enlightenment principles outlined above reflect a confidence in the ability of human reason to provide an understanding of the world, and faith in the ability of human beings to use this understanding subsequently to improve it. Before this could be achieved, however, humanity had to cast off the restrictions of religious authority. As Smart has put it, for the philosophers of the Enlightenment,[5] history was no longer seen as 'synonymous with God working his purpose out' (1992: 8). Rather, liberty of thought was, as Cassirer has noted, the defining feature of the Enlightenment vision:

> Instead of confining philosophy within the limits of a systematic doctrinal structure, instead of tying it to definite, immutable axioms and deductions from them, the Enlightenment wants philosophy to move freely and in this immanent activity to discover the fundamental form of reality, the form of all natural and spiritual being. (1951: vii)

Thus, to the proponents of this new intellectual order, human reason was to be allowed free reign, not only to understand the world more fully, but also to make it a better place for humanity to reside. Increasingly integral to this was a belief in the need to promote the approach and methods of the natural sciences. It was believed that through the tool of science, humanity would be able to tame the natural universe, to understand nature and so bring it under human dominion. Thus, reason, science and human progress became inexorably intertwined as knowledge came to be seen as the key to the creation of a secular version of heaven on earth.

As Cassirer suggests above, however, this is not to imply that the thinkers of the Enlightenment rejected wholesale the principle of a natural order of things. While the autonomy of the subject and the faculty of reason were central to their thinking, such autonomy was understood to be based upon a belief in the ability of reason to know and to control the natural world, rather than to create anew. The purpose of the natural sciences, in Enlightenment terms, was thus conceived of as being to search for the 'true' laws of nature, and not to invent such laws. The same can also be said of the social and political philosophies of the age. As Wagner notes, the philosophical systems which emerged in and through the Enlightenment may have rejected the imposition of religiously-grounded limits to thought and action but they continued to accept '. . . the idea of the *recognition* of worldly values and rules, existing before and beyond the individual, to be discovered, known and followed by human beings' (Wagner, 1994: 8 *original emphasis*). As such, there existed a tension at the birth of the modern world, a tension between the freedom of the individual and a belief in the rightful place of the human being within a pre-determined order of things.

Despite, or perhaps because of, this tension, the ideas that emerged from the Enlightenment ushered in a whole host of new ways of thinking about the world and humanity's relationship to it. The most obvious expression of the Enlightenment drive to knowledge was the aforementioned rise of the natural sciences and the advances in technology that derived from it. It was these rapid developments in science and technology that, combined with the expansion of capitalism as an increasingly global economic system, were to provide, at least in part, the driving force behind the modernization of the western world. Within a relatively short period (some two hundred years or so), the expansion of industrial capitalism radically transformed the face of western societies. By the mid-nineteenth century, levels of material production reached heights never before dreamt of, instigating a host of political, social and cultural changes in western societies which have come to be known collectively as the process of *modernization*. Transportation and communication systems became increasingly sophisticated and accessible. Populations became more urban and mobile, as huge towns and cities began to develop. Cash-driven markets began to take over as the primary mechanism for exchanging goods and services, and modes of social and economic organization began to develop which have come to be regarded as quintessentially modern.

This is not to suggest, however, that the modernization process was driven solely by material imperatives. Rather, a dialectical relationship can be identified between the material and ideational dimensions of modernity, that is, between modernization as a social process and modernism as an intellectual movement. The economic and social changes associated with modernization did not occur in isolation, but were shaped by *modernism* as a particular view of the social world, a view that was rooted in the Enlightenment project outlined above and was grounded, perhaps above all, in an unfaltering faith in the power of rational thought. From a modernist perspective, everything that exists in the world as an objective reality – including truth, beauty and morality, for instance – can be understood rationally. Not only does this understanding of the world render material and cultural progress inevitable, it also provides a basis for controlling and directing such progress.

The modernization process, combined with the philosophical and cultural ideas of modernism, therefore also played a vital role in shaping the subjective experience of humanity, and this was reflected in its expression in the form of art and other cultural products which further reinforced the modernist *geist*, or *spirit*. Modernist art, as it established itself in the nineteenth century, provides us with a useful example of the extent to which, as artists struggled to meet the challenges posed by new technologies such as cinema and photography, as well as to represent both the perceived joys and horrors of the modern age, diverse styles and approaches flourished. While some embraced the promises of science and technology and sought to exemplify the new spirit of progress through the medium of design, others challenged what they saw as the increasing cultural dominance of

the natural sciences, and sought to express the subjective alienation felt by many in the face of a constant process of upheaval and change characteristic of the experience of modernity. Modernism was thus, from its birth, a creature of tension and contradiction.

This was also more than evident in the emergent social sciences of the nineteenth century, themselves born of the expansion of a modern drive for knowledge and understanding and equally constitutive of the emerging modernist culture. Sociology, in particular, was a discipline born of attempts to chart and understand the social implications of modernization and, as such, contributed greatly to the intellectual and cultural discourse of modernism. For Karl Marx, one of the great figures of modern social science and philosophy, the driving force behind modernity was the expansion of industrial capitalism. For Marx, it was in capitalism – as a mode of production and exchange – that answers to questions emanating from the nature of the modern world could be found. As he noted:

> The bourgeois [the owners of capital] cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. . . . Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation, distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. (Marx and Engels, 1986 [1848]: 37)

For Marx, then, capitalism not only dictated the socio-economic terrain of society, but also served to define the subjective experience of modern life. It was a world in which 'all that is solid melts into air' (Marx and Engels, 1986 [1848]: 37), a world in which the dynamic of capitalism brought all that was once certain into question and all that was once stable into flux and upheaval. Sharing the same cultural sensibility as the radical artists of modernism, Marx understood modernity as the experience of contradiction and change, of the unholy combinations of certainty and uncertainty, stability and transience.

Marx was not, however, the only modern social scientist to recognize and seek to understand the changes that were taking place around him. For Emile Durkheim (1964 [1893]), perhaps the first professional sociologist, the defining feature of the modern age was a process of increasing economic, social and cultural differentiation. In Durkheim's view, modernization was a process that offered the hope of great progress and cultural development, but which also led to a sense of dislocation or uprootedness for those caught in its wake. As Marx had recognized previously, the driving force of modernity originated, for Durkheim, also in industrial capitalism's requirement for an increasingly specialized division of labour.

This was a view also shared, in part, by the third of the discipline of sociology's 'founding fathers', Max Weber. For Weber (1964 [1925]), the modernization of all dimensions of society had to be understood in terms of the mutation and spread of a particular form of rationality, one characterized by a prioritization of efficiency of method over the consideration of

ends, and exemplified in the spread of a bureaucratic system of administration as the dominant mode of social organization. In Weber's view, this system was one that championed the impersonal and the efficient at the expense of human spirituality and creativity, disenchanting and dehumanizing the individual as a consequence.

Another important example of a thinker who was both a great influence on Weber and perhaps more than any individual of his time, sensitive to the unstable and Janus nature of modernization in all its forms, was the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. While often contradictory in his declarations and, as such, subsequently misinterpreted through history, Nietzsche's (1989 [1887], 1990a [1886]) great concern was with what he believed to be the decadent and nihilistic path that modernity was leading humanity towards. The Enlightenment's blind faith in reason, or so Nietzsche thought, had in fact undermined the basis for all belief, had laid bare the metaphysical, and therefore unsustainable nature of those values that had, up until then, kept the passions and desires of humanity in check. In response, Nietzsche declared that the time had come to undertake what he terms on numerous occasions a 'revaluation of all values' (Nietzsche, 1990b [1895]: 197), championing a new moral and cultural sensibility that embraced the carnal nobility of that which had been marginalized by the discourses of modernity, and that rejected the proposed linear relationship between reason and progress. Hughes has interpreted this dimension of Nietzsche's writings by declaring:

> What do we do in a crisis of reason? What do we do when we think the mind incapable of guiding individual acts and social processes? What do we do when we consider that all concepts are simply deceptive rationalization? We turn to the body, to the passions and interests for clues to the meaning of being and becoming. (1996: 33–4)

Nietzsche therefore, while concerned with the same tensions of modernity as his social scientific contemporaries, rejected the possibility of a rational resolution to them. As such, his writings provided a unique contribution to the reflexive critique of modernity, one that was not however to have its most significant impact for some time to come.

In contrast, while Marx, Durkheim and Weber all recognized that the pace of change and the newly emerging social structures of modernity were tainted by a set of potentially negative consequences for the human subject – in terms of alienation, anomie and disenchantment – they, unlike Nietzsche, maintained throughout their accounts a faith in the power of reason and human agency to expose the underlying dynamics of modernization. Each of them was committed to the potential of modern ideas to offer a path of progress that would transcend its potentially dehumanizing consequences. For Marx, this was to be realized in the proletarian revolution, for Durkheim in the emergence of a new mode of organic social solidarity and, for Weber, in a somewhat more tentative vein, in the possible re-emergence of a charismatic political order.

In this sense at least, then, Marx, Durkheim and Weber in particular were all children of the Enlightenment, whose work sought both to chart the deeper causes of social change and, at one and the same time, to actively direct it in the service of human progress. Their ideas were not simply abstract reflections on the nature of knowledge or reality, but an integral aspect of the modernist age in which knowledge, reason and action were intimately connected, an age in which detractors such as Nietzsche notwithstanding, it was generally believed that despite the tensions and contradictions engendered by modernization, the truth would still set us free.

Systemic and critical modernism

Reflecting on the tensions inherent within modernity, and the relationship between modernity and organizations, Cooper and Burrell (1988: 95) have developed a useful distinction between what they term the 'systemic' and 'critical' dimensions of modernist thought. *Systemic modernism* represents the values and methods embedded within the rise to prominence of the natural sciences, combined with the deployment of formal rationality to identify and resolve problems of order and control. This is contrasted with *critical modernism*, which Cooper and Burrell locate within the radical tradition that evolved from the Enlightenment critique of religious authority and the concomitant belief in the faculty of reason to expose man-made (*sic*) restrictions upon individual autonomy. Thus, with its origins in Kant's (1991 [1784]: 9) evocation *aude sapere* or 'dare to reason', critical modernism represents the reflexive and emancipatory dimension of modernist thought.

Systemic modernism, on the other hand, is understood to be underpinned by the philosophical system of positivism, originating in the work of Comte and perhaps developed most fully in the work of the Vienna Circle (see Bryant, 1985), which emphasizes the universal applicability of the logic of the natural sciences to all aspects of knowledge production, and a belief in intellectual and social progress deriving from this. However, while systemic modernism is often critical of 'reactionary', non-scientific forms of thought, due to its emphasis on an immutable notion of reality as the foundation for all human activity, it has also come to be associated with a conservative approach to understanding the social world (see Adorno et al., 1976 [1969]; Cooper and Burrell, 1988; Marcuse, 1983). As Marcuse notes in this regard, for positivists such as Comte, 'society now was taken as a more or less definite complex of facts governed by more or less general laws – a sphere to be treated like any other field of scientific investigation' (1983: 340). The term 'systemic modernism' signifies, then, a belief in the objectivity of society, in the neutrality of science and, perhaps above all, a commitment to the promise of social progress through the harnessing of nature and the extension of technology.

Hence, while systemic modernism celebrates the constitutive power of

human reason and the potential of science to free humanity from tradition and the dominance of nature, critical modernism has tended to refuse to accept uncritically science's professed neutrality and the equation of reason with progress and freedom. Rather, it has emphasized instead the extent to which the principles of science have been instrumentally appropriated by a systemic impetus concerned primarily with the domination of nature, including human nature, and the crude identification of technological progress with human emancipation. From this perspective, the modern world, while characterized under systemic modernism by the pre-eminence of rationality, is deemed fundamentally irrational in that the conception of reason that has come to predominate is both narrow in its conception and inimical to the realization of humanity's capacity for critical self-reflection and autonomous action.

Yet this apparent divergence does not indicate a final and complete schism between the two traditions. As Cooper and Burrell (1988: 97) note, both systemic and critical perspectives hold to a number of shared convictions that could be described as quintessentially modernist. Both approaches maintain a strong faith in the idea that reason provides not only the key to unlocking the nature of reality, but that reality itself must be constituted in a manner congruent with reason. While this may be self-evident in the creed of systemic modernism, it also remains essential to the idea of critique that is so central to its critical variant. This is due to the idea that the activity of critique, as envisaged within the Enlightenment tradition outlined above, and which provides the philosophical *raison d'être* for critical modernism, is premised upon the idea that rational critique can be deployed to identify irrationality within the human world and, as such, bring the world back into line with its authentically rational nature.[6] Both traditions also maintain a humanist belief in the constitutive power of the human subject, that is, a subject which is able to bring under control, in the service of its own authenticated interests, both its natural and social environments. Be it the natural scientist splitting the atom to provide a source of energy, or the social revolutionary re-organizing society to ensure an equal distribution of resources, both are credited with purposeful agency in a world in which humanity, within the restrictions of nature at least, reigns supreme.

To sum up so far, then, it would appear that it is this shared faith in a universalistic conception of reason, and in the power of human agency to bring under its domain the vicissitudes and tensions of modern life, which not only unifies modernism in its various guises, but which also, as we shall see, provides the critical focus of what can broadly be termed postmodern meta-theory.

The rise of postmodern meta-theory

While the idea that a qualitatively distinct way of thinking and living is emerging, one that somehow marks a break with the past three hundred

years or so, gained momentum in the mid-1950s, the earliest sightings of the term postmodernism seem to have been in the late-nineteenth century when it was used to describe new modes of artistic expression, which were deemed, at the time, to be 'more modern and avant-garde than French impressionist painting' (Best and Kellner, 1991: 5). As Cahoone (1996) notes, the term also appeared in 1917 when the German philosopher Rudolf Pannwitz, drawing on Nietzsche, described contemporary culture as 'nihilistic', and again in the early 1930s when the term appeared in the work of Federico de Onis who used it to denote a move away from a modernist sensibility in literary criticism. It was not until the 1960s, however, that the term came to refer to anything like a self-conscious artistic movement when, as noted by Featherstone (1988: 203), it was adopted by a range of New York artists and writers to describe a reaction to what they saw as the 'exhaustion' of the radical aspirations of avant-garde modernism, exemplified by its incorporation into the cultural mainstream.

As this particular sensibility spread and refined itself throughout the early 1970s, when postmodernism came to denote a reaction to a modernist aesthetic in architecture, it led Jencks (1996: 470) to make his now somewhat infamous assertion that the symbolic demise of the modernist vision took place at around 3.32 p.m. on 15 July 1972 in St Louis, Missouri. This was the time when the Pruitt–Igoe housing development, a model example of the 'intelligent planning of abstract space', was demolished, having degenerated into what was considered to be a violent and uninhabitable ghetto. It was, Jencks claimed, a perfect example of how modern architecture, as the heir to Enlightenment rationality, had ultimately proven to be as irrational as the philosophy from which it drew its inspiration. Jencks conceived postmodernism, then, as having not only embraced the critical modernist critique of the technicist and instrumentalist values of its systemic counterpart, but also as having moved beyond the proposition that reason and human progress were mutually interdependent. The postmodern, as he saw it, was more than simply an attempt to re-inaugurate the reflexive and critical dimension of the modern spirit. Rather, it represented a transcendence of the very principles that lay at the core of modernity. In many respects, then, Jencks's view epitomizes what might be characterized as a mode of post-Enlightenment meta-theoretical reflection that has sought to challenge, and in some cases undermine, the foundation of western thought as it has existed for around three hundred years.

As a meta-theory, postmodernism rejects the modernist perception that so-called realities – truth, beauty and morality, for instance – have an objective existence beyond how we represent them. As Best and Kellner have put it, the modernist assumption of a fixed, immutable, absolute truth is 'precisely the conception skillfully undermined by postmodern critique' (1997: 236). In other words, postmodernism emphasizes that the social world does not exist, awaiting discovery. Rather, what we take to be the social world is actually nothing more than our conception of it. While,

because of particular configurations of power, knowledge, subjectivity and language, certain models of reality are privileged, ultimately one version of reality, beauty or morality is equally as 'true' as any other. From this perspective, the Enlightenment drive to create a 'better' world is, at best, misguided and, at worst, tyrannical, based as it is on only one particular perspective or mode of rationality. Postmodernism, then, asks fundamental questions of modernist attempts to understand and shape the social world, attempts which have come to be associated particularly with the work of social scientists such as Marx, Weber and Durkheim.

If these three represent the holy trinity of modern sociology, the same can perhaps be said of the trio of French theorists – Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida – in relation to the development of postmodern meta-theory. This is not to suggest that a number of significant contributions to the development of postmodernism as an intellectual endeavour have not emerged elsewhere. Figures such as Richard Rorty (1989) in the USA and Gianni Vattimo (1992) in Italy, for example, have offered a number of novel and significant insights to its development. Similarly, the work of feminist theorists such as Judith Butler (1990a, 1993) in the USA, and particularly of the new French feminists such as Hélène Cixous (1986), Luce Irigaray (1985, 1990) and Julia Kristeva (1980), has contributed significantly to contemporary debates on the idea of the postmodern trio. However, both in terms of their general influence on the development of postmodern meta-theory, and their particular influence on the impact postmodern thought has had on the recent development of organization theory, Lyotard, Foucault and Derrida remain the essential postmodern. While each of them have, at one time or another, sought to disassociate themselves from the postmodern canon that has flourished in the wake of their writings, it is virtually impossible to consider any aspect of postmodern philosophy or meta-theory without encountering at least one of these names and their associated ideas.

That said, it is perhaps more accurate to describe all three of them more as post-structuralist than postmodern thinkers. Post-structuralism, while difficult to encapsulate in a few sentences, can best be understood as a broadly philosophical approach to the relationship between the human subject and structural forces such as culture, language and tradition. Deriving from its predecessor structuralism,[7] post-structuralism considers the world that we inhabit, including the subjective experience of that world, to be the outcome and product of language. This position, then, ultimately seems to lead to an inability to talk of anything like an essential or immutable reality existing outside the language that we use to describe it. As such our descriptions about the world, our moral judgements or political beliefs are reduced to the status of stories of the world as we see it, premised upon our linguistically constituted apprehension of the world. Post-structuralism can be described, then, as providing a philosophical basis for the postmodern critique of the absolute claims to knowledge that,

as we have seen, provides the basis for a modernist worldview. Thus, while it would take another book to unravel the relationship between post-structuralism and postmodernism, it is fair to say that the interrelationship between post-structuralism and postmodernism is an intimate one, one shaped not least by a preoccupation with the relationship between language, subjectivity and knowledge, a concern exemplified in the work of Jean-François Lyotard.

Knowledge and The Postmodern Condition

Originally published in 1979, it was the 1984 English translation of Lyotard's short essay, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, which popularized the term postmodernism within philosophy and the social sciences and identified Lyotard, for many, as the leading meta-theorist of postmodernism. It is here that Lyotard expounded his view that underpinning modernism, as an intellectual and cultural phenomenon, was a collection of what he termed *metanarratives* (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv). He used this term to describe any form of narrative deployed to legitimate claims to knowledge or action. The most influential of these, for Lyotard, were the positivist version of natural science and the speculative tradition in German idealism that reached its zenith in the historical materialism of Marx. Yet, for Lyotard, it is the very history of modernity that has exposed such metanarratives as nothing more than convenient fictions. Marxism, in Lyotard's view, for example, has failed spectacularly to provide the progress and emancipation it has promised for so long. Even natural scientists, themselves reliant upon a metanarrative of objectivity and progress, are no longer able to defend the metaphysical realism of their claims to scientific knowledge as the harbinger of emancipation and progress.

For Lyotard, then, the recognition that overarching stories of truth, progress and eventual emancipation are nothing more than historical narratives constitutes postmodernism as a mode of knowledge. A mode of knowledge which is represented by Lyotard as 'an incredulity towards metanarratives' (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv), and as a search for new modes of representing knowledge and truth in a world devoid of any firm ontological, epistemological or ethical foundations and, drawing on the work of Bell (1973), driven by the economic and organizational imperatives of a new socio-economic post-industrialism. This combination of an incredulity towards metanarratives and recognition of the contingency of all claims to knowledge is what, for Lyotard (1984), constitutes the postmodern condition.

Lyotard welcomed the demise of metanarratives and the emergence of a plurality of epistemologies. He championed a heterogeneity of knowledge claims and, indeed, celebrated a diversity of narratives as the basis for a postmodern science which would respect the relative incommensurability of what he termed *language games*[8] (Lyotard, 1984: 10). In this sense,

Lyotard argued that we must learn to acknowledge and respect the legitimacy of a range of linguistically embedded modes of understanding. As he put it,

> consensus does violence to the heterogeneity of language games. And invention is always born of dissension. Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. (1984: xxv)

Lyotard thus rejected what he perceived to be the universalizing and totalizing ambitions of Enlightenment philosophy, especially in terms of its belief in the desirability of consensus underpinning a democratic politics. In this respect, it could be argued that Lyotard expresses an anti-democratic sentiment, one that views the tyranny of the majority as every bit as undesirable as the tyranny of the few. He saw conflict, or the playing out of language games, as the key to a dynamic culture based on a celebration of diverse modes of understanding and experiencing the world. In contrast to what he perceived as the essentially modernist pursuit of consensus, Lyotard thus professed a form of postmodern politics which rested on a rejection of the quest for systematic order across all spheres of knowledge. In a critique reminiscent of Weber, he argued that such scientific domination would result in a society in which all values and actions were to be judged solely in terms of a principle of 'maximum performance' (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv). Consequently, he felt that the only alternative to the ascendance of such a preformatted, scientific worldview, one based purely on the principle of efficiency and utility, was a pluralistic politics of difference.

While Lyotard's later work sought to move beyond the centrality of the language game, the basic thrust of his thinking remained the same. Of note, however, was his subsequent rejection of the idea, developed most notably in his 1988 text *The Differend*, that language is something that can simply be 'used', in other words, subjected to the intentions of a free and autonomous individual. Rather, he argued, language actually constitutes the self-understanding and social positioning of the subject. For Lyotard (1988), an individual's sense of self is the product of various linguistic structures, which provide the building blocks from which subjectivity emerges. In this sense, Lyotard touches upon another particularly important theme that appears to resurface in a number of contemporary post-structuralist accounts of the postmodern, namely, the so-called *death of the subject.*

Before considering this theme in more depth in the following section, a number of criticisms that Lyotard's work has been subjected to should be noted. Perhaps the most striking problem identified in Lyotard's account is his attempted theorization of the postmodern condition and of the material conditions underpinning its emergence. For, in deploying a range of concepts associated with a number of developments in the productive relations of western societies,[9] Lyotard accepts, apparently uncritically,

what seems to represent the sort of generalization that he is at pains to attack. While this may in itself be forgivable, offering as he is a treatise on the possibility of a postmodern mode of knowledge rather than on some process of social or economic postmodernization, the causal relationship he establishes between the latter and the former remains problematic in his account. In our view, this is largely because Lyotard apparently continues to rely upon a highly modernist narrative of social evolution to explain his own version of postmodernity. As Best and Kellner note in this regard:

> Rejecting grand narratives, . . . simply covers over the theoretical problem of providing a narrative of the contemporary historical situation and points to the undertheorized nature of Lyotard's account of the postmodern condition. (1991: 173)

Also, it is difficult to recognize anything particularly postmodern about the political position that emerges from Lyotard's emphasis on respect for the multiplicity of language games. While we undoubtedly continue to inhabit a world in which disenfranchised social groups are consistently denied a voice or the means to address their inferior socio-economic conditions, Lyotard's appeal for an acceptance of pluralism seems to offer little except the chance to enter a cultural marketplace in which socio-economic power remains the currency of the day. In this sense at least, rather than incredulity towards metanarratives, Lyotard's account seems to read more like the final victory of classic liberalism. Further, as Kumar (1995: 135) notes, the cost we may have to pay for the end of ideological fanaticism could in fact be too high, robbing us, as it might, of the passion and cultural creativity 'that comes of the struggle of ideologies'.

Despite such criticisms, there has been a fairly favourable response towards the underlying message to be found in Lyotard's writing, especially within theories centring on the idea of radical democracy (see, for example, Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). More generally, his pluralistic vision of a new politics can be seen to reflect many of the changes that have actually taken place in the arena of radical political thought since the early 1980s. Disillusionment with traditional political parties and the growth, often albeit transitory, of single-issue pressure groups, united around issues such as environmental protection, anti-racism or lesbian and gay rights, all reflect the kind of respect for difference that Lyotard would have championed. Furthermore, his appeal for the need to embrace a more eclectic notion of science, one free to draw upon a number of differing or contesting traditions, has also had a significant impact upon social science research and practice, reinvigorating the critical spirit within certain quarters of the field and contributing to the preparedness of those outside its orbit to question the hegemonic status of the natural sciences.

Power/knowledge and subjectivity

While Lyotard's work perhaps represents the closest thing to a coherent exegesis on the nature of postmodern knowledge, it is the extensive work of Michel Foucault that seems to have, thus far at least, exerted most influence on the postmodern turn in the social sciences. The origins of Foucault's own version of the assault on the nature of modern knowledge can be found in the Marxist structuralism of his mentor, Louis Althusser (1969), and also, more specifically, in the linguistic structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure (1974) and Roland Barthes (1973). For Foucault, however, the primary structural matrix is to be found specifically in the relationship between knowledge and power and its socio-cultural mediation in the form of *discourse*. A discourse, an integrated set of ideas or conceptual schema, is not simply verbal in Foucault's work; it also includes various practices determining the context and constitution of reality. Hence, discourse in this sense refers to those unwritten rules which frame what can and cannot be said about any given phenomenon. In this respect, Foucault raised discourse to a primary position in terms of not only what we can say about the world, but also how we can know it. Foucault did not conceive of language, in the form of discourse, as a neutral tool of representation, but as the mechanism through which our sense of what exists in the world is constituted. Emphasizing the relative nature of truth, he rejected the Enlightenment belief in the neutrality of knowledge and the transparency of language and, in turn, sought to uncover how various historically-situated 'truths', or *epistemes* (Foucault, 1970), came into being and served to legitimate certain modes of social power.

Modernity, in Foucault's thought, is characterized by the victory of a regime of power/knowledge that acquires its legitimization through the Enlightenment-inspired discourses of universal reason, subjective autonomy and historical progress. In contrast to the critical tradition associated, most notably, with Marxism, what Foucault's work does *not* do is identify the exercise of power with any particular social class or group. Power is, in Foucault's terms, 'everywhere' (Foucault, 1977a, 1977b) embedded within all forms of social relations and discursive situations. As such, power is represented in Foucault's writing not as a stable quantity, but rather as a fluid phenomenon which comes into being only in and through action. Nor does Foucault view power as purely repressive in the traditional sense. Rather, power, for him, is equally creative and productive:

> What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh upon us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network that runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression. (1980: 119)

Of particular interest in this respect are Foucault's ideas regarding the role of power in the constitution of the individual subject. In a similar vein

to Lyotard, the autonomous individual is presented by Foucault as the outcome of a uniquely modern discourse, one that functions through various technologies of power that simultaneously construct and demarcate the individual as that which Foucault termed the 'subject/object' of knowledge. For Foucault, the rise of modern institutions such as the asylum, the prison and even the factory has produced, through the acquisition and deployment of regimes of power/knowledge, a range of objectified categories of subjectivity. These have, in turn, provided templates through which the idea of what it is to be an individual subject has been internalized. Foucault therefore rejected the humanist ideas, outlined earlier, that equate self-conscious subjectivity with autonomy and freedom, arguing instead for the need to deconstruct the idea of the subject, which he viewed as an historically contingent outcome of discursively ordered relations of power/knowledge.

This aspect of his work in particular brings Foucault close, in many ways, to the political position of Lyotard. Deprived of any neutral conception of knowledge, one that is not deeply enmeshed in relations of power, Foucault's work alludes to the need for micro-political strategies of resistance. This is made possible by his contention that despite the omnipresent nature of power, there remains space for resistance precisely at the very points where power is exercised. Thus, Foucault argued that there exists space for individuals to 'recreate themselves' in opposition to dominant discursive representations. This particular aspect of his thinking is made possible, however, only by a shift in his later work away from a concern with relations of domination, towards more of an emphasis on the individual's potential for self-invention. In this latter approach, he declared that any new and radical political project must acknowledge the fact that 'we have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for centuries' (cited in Best and Kellner, 1991: 63). This dimension of Foucault's account of subjectivity and power/knowledge opens up a whole range of issues that appears to be deeply problematic, however.

Apart from the criticisms raised previously with regard to Lyotard's conception of the need for localized politics based on the playing out of language games, which can equally be directed at Foucault's own conception of a micro-politics of resistance, there exists the deeper question of Foucault's ontology. Particularly problematic, it could be argued, is his ontology of the subject. As has been noted above, central to his diagnosis of the modern subject is its status as the outcome of discursive relations of power/knowledge. As such, how can the subject, itself represented as little more than an historically contingent outcome of power in all its manifestations, engage in any form of self-creation without reinforcing those power relations against which such activity is supposedly directed? In Foucault's analysis (as in Lyotard's later work), the purposeful subject has, it would seem, largely gone missing. Furthermore, as power is understood not to reside in any particular site or social structure, but to exist relationally, in a

state of constant re-negotiation, the question of 'who is the subject?' is compounded by that of 'against whom does the subject direct its resistance?'. Indeed, when faced with this very question Foucault's own reply was less than convincing; that, at best, we must consider the exercise of power to be a 'war of all against all' (Foucault, 1980: 208).

Ironically, we could say, much of Foucault's historically-based analysis does indeed, despite his insistence on a non-hierarchical and highly diffuse concept of power, portray a set of incredibly hierarchical institutions which act as technologies of power. Thus, while Foucault undoubtedly sensitizes us to the idea of power as something which pervades social relations and that subjectivity, contra the Enlightenment view, is not something that is simply present as a universal quality, the problems inherent in his analysis provide a basis for further discussion as the following chapters unfold.

Deconstruction: a postmodern method?

While Foucault's particular brand of postmodernism focused primarily upon the ways in which language, in the form of discourse, functions as a medium of power, it is in the work of Jacques Derrida that the concern with language can be seen to take on a far more methodological flavour.[10] While complex in the extreme, Derrida's work has proven to be a particularly influential approach to the analysis of the ways in which language structures our understanding of ourselves and the world we inhabit, an approach he termed *deconstruction* (Derrida, 1976: 24). In its simplest formulation, deconstruction can be taken to refer to a methodological strategy which seeks to uncover layers of hidden meaning in a text that have been denied or suppressed.[11] The term 'text', in this respect, does not refer simply to a written form of communication, however. Rather, texts are something we all produce and reproduce constantly in our everyday social relations, be they spoken, written or embedded in the construction of material artifacts.

At the heart of Derrida's deconstructive approach is his critique of what he perceives to be the totalitarian impulse of the Enlightenment pursuit to bring all that exists in the world under the domain of a representative language, a pursuit he refers to as *logocentrism* (Derrida, 1976: 3). Logocentrism is the search for a rational language that is able to know and represent the world and all its aspects perfectly and accurately. Its totalitarian dimension, for Derrida at least, lies primarily in its tendency to marginalize or dismiss all that does not neatly comply with its particular linguistic representations, a tendency that, throughout history, has all too frequently been manifested in the form of authoritarian institutions. Thus logocentrism has, in its search for the truth of absolute representation, subsumed difference and oppressed that which it designates as its alien Other. For Derrida, western civilization has been built upon such a systematic assault on alien cultures and ways of life, typically in the name of reason and progress.

In response to logocentrism, deconstruction posits the idea that the

mechanism by which this process of marginalization and the ordering of truth occurs is through establishing systems of binary opposition. Oppositional linguistic dualisms, such as rational/irrational, culture/nature and good/bad are not, however, construed as equal partners as they are in, say, the semiological structuralism of Saussure. Rather, they exist, for Derrida, in a series of hierarchical relationships with the first term normally occupying a superior position. Derrida defines the relationship between such oppositional terms using the neologism *différance* (Derrida, 1976: 23). This refers to the realization that in any statement, oppositional terms differ from each other (for instance, the difference between rationality and irrationality is constructed through oppositional usage), and at the same time, a hierarchical relationship is maintained by the deferral of one term to the other (in the positing of rationality over irrationality, for instance). It is this latter point which is perhaps the key to understanding Derrida's approach to deconstruction. For the fact that at any given time one term must defer to its oppositional Other, means that the two terms are constantly in a state of interdependence. The presence of one is dependent upon the absence or 'absent-presence' of the Other, such as in the case of good and evil, whereby to understand the nature of one, we must constantly relate it to the absent term in order to grasp its meaning. That is, to do good, we must understand that our act is not evil for without that comparison the term becomes meaningless. Put simply, deconstruction represents an attempt to demonstrate the absent-presence of this oppositional Other, to show that what we say or write is in itself not expressive simply of what is present, but also of what is absent. Thus, deconstruction seeks to reveal the interdependence of apparently dichotomous terms and their meaning relative to their textual context; that is, within the linguistic power relations which structure dichotomous terms hierarchically. In Derrida's own words, a deconstructive reading

> must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of a language that he uses. . . . [It] attempts to make the not-seen accessible to sight. (1976: 158, 163)

Meaning, then, is never fixed or stable, whatever the intention of the author of a text. For Derrida, language is a system of relations that are dynamic, in that all meanings we ascribe to the world are dependent not only on what we believe to be present but also on what is absent. Thus, any act of interpretation must refer not only to what the author of a text intends, but also to what is absent from his or her intention. This insight leads, once again, to Derrida's further rejection of the idea of the definitive authority of the intentional agent or subject. The subject is decentred; it is conceived as the outcome of relations of *différance*. As author of its own biography, the subject thus becomes the ideological fiction of modernity and its logocentric philosophy, one that depends upon the formation of hierarchical dualisms which repress and deny the presence of the absent

Other. No meaning can, therefore, ever be definitive, but is merely an outcome of a particular interpretation.

His critique of the repressive nature of the hierarchical structures of western philosophy also leads Derrida to a political stance which is similar to that encountered in the work of Lyotard and Foucault. While he is reticent to attach himself to any firm political project, his support for various radical causes could be taken to be indicative of the radical potential of a politics of deconstruction, which seeks to expose the subjugation of the Other in all spheres of human life. Derrida has even attempted a limited reconciliation with Marxism, positing deconstruction as a radicalization of the Marxist 'spirit' (Derrida, 1994).

What Derridean deconstruction does not offer, however, is a systematic political programme. Rather, it represents what Seidman (1998) has described as a 'politics of subversion'. Once again, we are faced here with an indubitable tension between the call for a politics of social critique and the lack of any apparent foundation from whence this can be mobilized. Having sought to undermine the possibility of certitude, to unmask the repressive nature of philosophical logocentrism, and to identify the undecideability of meaning, it begs the question 'on what normative foundations can political critique be defended?'. Furthermore, is it legitimate when discussing political and social problems to refer to reality as nothing more than a 'text'? While it might be legitimate to acknowledge the indeterminacy of meaning within the literary universe (although this, in itself, is highly contentious), social discourse, it could be argued, is embedded within the constraints and boundaries established by 'real' political practices and economic relations. Indeed, Derrida himself appears acutely aware of the suffering that such factors cause millions of people across the globe. It would seem that the deconstructionist rejection of a realist ontology, combined with a concomitant suspicion of the metanarratives of truth and emancipation in Derrida's work, is, as Kumar (1995: 131) notes, so 'relentlessly subversive that it subverts itself'. A problem particularly evident when postmodernism is translated into the pursuit of a radical politics of change, which Lyotard, Foucault and Derrida have all championed in one form or another.

From postmodernism to postmodernity

So far we have sought to address, through the work of three of its leading theorists, the idea of the postmodern as a series of meta-theoretical propositions. The ideas of postmodernism have been defined, in large part, in opposition to the philosophical ideas bequeathed by the Enlightenment and include, most notably, a rejection of the possibility of a representational and universal truth, and of the essentially unified nature of the knowing subject, combined with a decline in the legitimacy or credibility of metanarratives that link the progress of knowledge with human emancipation.

Instead, postmodernism has emphasized the centrality of epistemological heterogeneity, the valorization of cultural and political difference, and the ways in which the idea of the rational, autonomous subject is itself the outcome of a conjunction of historically specific discursive formations.

While relatively extensive in its exposition of a postmodern alternative to the philosophical worldview associated with the Enlightenment, the work of those postmodern theorists considered so far has nevertheless lacked any coherent attempt to develop an analysis of contemporary socio-cultural conditions in relation to a process of postmodernization. Of course, it is perhaps not surprising that those who adhere to the principles of a postmodern approach to questions of knowledge find it difficult to consider the extent to which we are now experiencing the postmodern as a 'new social formation' (Bertens, 1995: 209). After all, such an approach would itself rely on the possibility of mobilizing the kind of totalizing socio-cultural analysis that postmodern thought appears to reject. Indeed, the idea of a condition of postmodernity would, it could be argued, have to be the creation of a particularly modernist way of looking at the world, relying, as it does, on the ability to discern holistic regularities and causal relations between the cultural, economic and intellectual realms of social life. Any account of postmodernity, then, would involve synthesizing diverse aspects of the social world into a more or less totalizing analysis of the contemporary condition.

On the whole, where such attempts have been made, therefore, they have tended to occur largely outside of the work of postmodern meta-theorists and to be located in the writing of those who can perhaps be described more accurately as theorists of postmodernity (Featherstone, 1991; Harvey, 1989; Jameson, 1991; Lash, 1990), who tend to emphasize the extent to which postmodernity can best be understood as a socio-cultural phenomenon. While remaining deeply sceptical about the more outlandish claims of postmodern meta-theory, such theorists have sought to understand the rise of a postmodern sensibility largely in relation to a parallel shift in the socio-cultural and economic relations of contemporary western capitalism. Perhaps the most notorious among these is Jean Baudrillard, who has, over the last thirty years or so, produced a series of ideas that, if not necessarily definitive of the possible characteristics of a postmodern society, outline what he sees as being its primary features while, at the same time, claiming to reject the totalizing conventions of modernist social science.

The hyper-reality of postmodernity

The seemingly ever-present ghost of Marx has provided the backdrop for many of the ideas that have emerged within the postmodern genre representing, for Lyotard in particular, one of the great metanarratives of modernity. It is in the work of Baudrillard, however, that Marxism provides the clearest theoretical starting point for an analysis of postmodernity. Drawing on Marx's account of the primacy of commodity relations under

capitalism, Baudrillard has argued that it is no longer the exchange value of commodities *per se* that underpins socio-cultural and economic relations, but rather the symbolic value that we attach to such commodities. Through what Baudrillard terms their *sign value* commodities provide the basis for socio-economic and, indeed, cultural exchange (Baudrillard, 1981). In a similar vein to Derrida, Baudrillard views signs as having broken away from any referent relationship to objects in the real world and, for that matter, to any fixed internal relationship between what they signify and what they mean. Thus, for Baudrillard, it is no longer the exchange value of the object that ascribes its value, but rather its value as a sign in relation to other signs. We no longer consume objects either for their use or for their exchange value, but rather for what they signify or say about us, or the kind of person we would want to be seen as.

The domination of the sign within contemporary society has led to a situation, Baudrillard (1983a, 1983b) argues, in which an implosion has occurred, one that has eradicated previously held distinctions between originality and representation, truth and fiction. This had led to a process that Baudrillard refers to as *simulation*, whereby simulated models of the real replace the real itself. As Baudrillard puts it, ‘it is no longer a question of imitation, nor of replication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself’ (1988a: 167). Baudrillard refers to perfect simulations that are more real than reality itself as *simulacra*; copies without an original to which they can be compared or designated as replica. In turn, these generate a state of *hyper-reality*, (Baudrillard, 1993: 146) whereby the simulation supplants the real and which, in turn, establishes the template for further simulations so that the idea of the real or original no longer has any bearing on the way we perceive the relationship between reality and representation. Hyper-reality, then, means that

> you can never really go back to the source, you can never interrogate an event, a character, a discourse about its degree of original reality. That’s what I call hyper-reality. Fundamentally, it’s a domain where you can no longer interrogate the reality or unreality, the truth or falsity of something. (Baudrillard, 1993: 146).

A notable example of hyper-reality can be identified in idealized images of femininity or masculinity frequently portrayed in the mass media. These are more than simply representations of the ideal body because, in ‘reality’, nobody (*sic*) is ‘really’ this perfect. Rather, such images are simulations, based upon established *codes* which people then strive to emulate as perfect examples of a non-existent reality. Baudrillard, in turn, theorizes the emergence of hyper-reality in terms of a process he terms *implosion*. As Best and Kellner (1991) note, this does not simply refer to an implosion or collapse of the boundaries between the real and the hyper-real, the original and the simulation, but between all dualistic modes of understanding and organizing in everyday life. High and low culture, politics and entertainment, work and leisure are all de-differentiated. Implosion therefore implies a reversal of the

differentiating tendencies of modernity identified particularly by Durkheim that we outlined earlier in this chapter. Baudrillard's analysis of postmodernity, then, while clearly (and some would say, somewhat ironically) an attempt to present a totalizing analysis of the condition of contemporary western societies, reflects a number of the themes we have encountered in our discussion of postmodernism thus far. Like Lyotard, Baudrillard grounds his diagnosis of postmodernism in the collapse of any certain basis for claims to truth or knowledge.

However, unlike the work of postmodern meta-theorists encountered so far, Baudrillard's analysis of postmodernity is far less imbued with any form of radical political agenda. Indeed, hyper-reality seems to leave little scope for meaningful political engagement of any kind, with society reduced to a 'silent majority' (Baudrillard, 1988a) of mindless consumers who, in Baudrillard's account at least, have been enchanted by the signs and images of the mass media. Baudrillard's own version of the death of the subject thesis results, therefore, in his positing the social world as beyond the possibility of human intervention (Baudrillard, 1990). The only political strategy left for Baudrillard is for the subject to make the conscious decision to become more 'object-like' and, in doing so, jettison those attributes of agency and meaning that are deemed obsolete. The last meaningful act, or 'fatal strategy' (Baudrillard, 1988a: 185) on the part of the subject, then, is to renounce all meaningful acts and to relinquish the motivation to pursue any purposeful activity.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that considering the somewhat nihilistic conclusion reached in Baudrillard's account of postmodernity, his work has encountered extensive criticism from several quarters. Many of these criticisms are simply variations of those we have considered thus far in relation to postmodernism as a meta-theory. However, his apparent willingness to provide what he considers to be an empirically defensible representation of the social and cultural configurations of a postmodern world has left Baudrillard vulnerable to charges of methodological ineptitude and empirical misrepresentation. For example, in relation to the material contained in his travelogue *America* (1988b), Best and Kellner critically observe how Baudrillard 'hangs out in southern California and concludes that the United States is a "realized utopia". He fails to see, however, the homeless, the poor, racism and sexism, people dying of AIDS, oppressed immigrants . . . ' (1991: 138). Yet, as they go on to note, such gross empirical oversights would be tolerable if Baudrillard acknowledged the epistemological consequences of his diagnosis of the condition of knowledge in a postmodernized world and, as such, professed to be offering nothing more than a very particular interpretation or 'story'. However, this does not appear to be the case, for Baudrillard seeks continually to express what he considers to be the 'truth' about contemporary society, a truth that he appears to claim is itself universal. In this sense at least, Best and Kellner note how, in their opinion, 'Baudrillard represents totalizing thought at its worst' (1991: 140).

Nevertheless, despite the apparent limitations of Baudrillard's theory of postmodernity, or at least the limitations of its credibility, there can be no doubt that in many ways his work exemplifies the postmodern cultural spirit. His style is eclectic, his attention to academic standards of citation and argumentation questionable,[12] and his observations frequently verge on the intellectually offensive. It may be, therefore, that it is not what Baudrillard says, but how he says it (and the fact that he achieves considerable recognition for it) that reveals so much about the condition of postmodernity.

While Baudrillard's account of postmodernity may be somewhat unpalatable for some, there can be no doubt that it raises a number of themes and issues that have had a considerable impact upon the ways in which social scientists and philosophers think about the social world. In particular, his work on the increasing significance played by the mass media on the way we perceive the world around us, his writing on the apparent implosion of social and cultural categories, and his ideas on the emergence of simulated modes of experiencing the world all resonate with a number of contemporary concerns within the social sciences, to which we now turn our attention. In the penultimate section of this chapter, we consider these themes as they have been presented in the work of a number of contemporary social and cultural theorists who have conceptualized the changes that societies of the industrialized world are currently facing as 'postmodernity'.

Postmodern culture: de-differentiation, space and capital

For some theorists of postmodernity, new modes of technology, processes of globalization and a concomitant shifting cultural sensibility have imploded into a state of postmodernity that marks a significant empirical shift away from the socio-cultural contours of the modern epoch. Featherstone (1991) in particular views postmodernism as a largely hedonistic cultural phenomenon shaped by consumerism as the pursuit of pleasure. For Featherstone, postmodern culture provides an opportunity to engage with a multiplicity of identities and cultural experiences.[13] A not dissimilar approach is taken by Lash (1990), for whom postmodernity can best be understood as a process of *de-differentiation* through which boundaries between what were previously taken to be distinct and separate cultural and intellectual spheres are collapsed. Echoing Baudrillard's (1983a, 1983b) conception of social and cultural implosion outlined above, this process of de-differentiation is understood as a shift from a modern to a postmodern 'figural' configuration (Lash, 1990: ix) whereby previous distinctions of taste and value are no longer tenable.

Theorists such as Jameson (1991) and Harvey (1989) have, in turn, developed highly influential and, it could be argued, more critical analyses of postmodernism inspired largely by a Marxist reading of such developments. In such accounts, postmodernity tends to be conceptualized as a

series of cultural and intellectual forms representing what Jameson terms 'the cultural logic of late capitalism'.[14] For Jameson (1991: 1), *late capitalism* refers to a stage of capitalism driven largely by electronic technologies of production and distribution, and the concomitant emphasis this places on the need to increase rates of consumption so as to avoid economic crises deriving from overproduction. It is this imperative which he views as the driving force of cultural de-differentiation and the pursuit of an essentially hedonistic culture, materialized in the desire to consume the products of late capitalism. Thus, for Jameson, the postmodernization of culture and the rise of a postmodern intellect, are both epiphenomena of a structural shift in the forces and relations of capitalist production. Consumer culture is thus seen to function as the focal point for the construction of individual identities, providing some, albeit transitory, sense of stability and location for the fragmented postmodern subject. That 'we are what we consume' is the logic of a postmodern society for Featherstone and Jameson alike. For Jameson, however, while consumerism provides a point of social integration, it also denies the subject any critical vantage point from which they can view their relationship to the broader make-up of socio-economic relations.

David Harvey's (1989) analysis of the 'condition of postmodernity', provides a similar, if somewhat more extensively materialist, account of postmodernity. Harvey identifies *postmodernization* as a shift from the rigid practices of Fordism to the flexible modes of production and exchange characteristic of a post-Fordist mode of economic organization (see Chapter 2). Emerging from this is what he terms a process of 'time–space compression' (Harvey, 1989: 284), which, for Harvey, describes the cultural impact of the expansion of new technologies of exchange and production, as well as the rapid computerization of international finance markets. As Harvey describes it:

> with accelerations in turnover times in production, exchange and consumption. . . . Past experiences get compressed into some overwhelming present. . . . Everything, from novel writing and philosophizing to the experience of labouring or making a home, has to face the challenge of accelerating turnover time and the rapid write-off of traditional and historically acquired values. (1989: 291)

Both Jameson and Harvey, therefore, critically analyse the possible configurations of postmodernity as a cultural and social response to developments in contemporary capitalism. As such, they reject what they see as the more outlandish claims that postmodernism in some way represents an exclusively novel mode of social organization. Rather, while both appear willing to accept the idea of the postmodern as a socio-cultural phenomenon, they consider it to represent more of a *re-configuration* of essentially modernist values and forms of socio-cultural life necessitated by technologically-driven changes in the nature of capitalism.

In a similar, if more sceptical vein, Anthony Giddens (1990) and Ulrich Beck (1992) have argued that while a range of important socio-economic

changes are taking place, especially in relation to the changing relationship between time and space, and the increasingly significant role of reflexivity in defining the contours of contemporary culture, to describe the age we are entering as postmodern may be somewhat premature. Instead, they argue that while modernity is currently undergoing a period of transition, this can be best characterized as a period of *late or reflexive modernity*, one in which we are coming to terms with the changes alluded to above. Furthermore, implicit within this argument is the belief that postmodernity will not, and indeed cannot, be achieved unless humanity is able to overcome the very features of the crisis that appear to have established, for other writers, the idea that we are already entering a postmodern age. This in itself can only be achieved, for Beck in particular, through *more* modernization, not less. By this he means the broader and more concerted applications of reason to overcome the legacy of industrialization, to raise the desire for a better world above that of a crude faith in industrial technology and the goods it produces.

A more comprehensive rejection of the idea of the postmodern, in all its manifestations, is to be found in the work of the Marxist critic Alex Callinicos (1989) and the critical social theory of Jürgen Habermas (1987a, 1989, 1993). Habermas, for example, defends what he considers to be the incomplete project of modernity (Habermas, 1993), from those such as Foucault, Lyotard and Derrida, whom he considers to be 'young conservatives', far too eager to reject the emancipatory potential of modernity and its belief in the power of reason to uncover and dispel prejudice and repression. In his definitively titled *Against Postmodernism* (1989), Callinicos dismisses the idea that postmodernism in any way represents a meaningful break with the cultural, economic or organizational imperatives of modernity. While he agrees with the likes of Lash and Featherstone that the last thirty years or so have witnessed the growth of a new social strata of well educated, culturally sophisticated consumers, Callinicos does not equate the popularization of postmodernism simply with the economic and cultural strength of this particular group. Rather, he views it as the direct outcome of the perceived failure of the revolutionary spirit of the late 1960s and the retreat of the intellectuals at the heart of this movement away from any radical political engagement in the face of a consumer capitalism which appears, at least, to have achieved an almost unassailable hegemonic status. For Callinicos, 'the discourse of postmodernism is best seen as the product of a socially mobile intelligentsia in a climate dominated by the retreat of the Western labour movement and the "overconsumptionist" dynamic of capitalism in the Reagan–Thatcher era' (1989: 171).

Thus, while his analysis is essentially similar to those of Harvey and Jameson, for Callinicos, to reject the idea of the postmodern is essentially a political act. Postmodernism, in his analysis, is little more than an ideological system, fabricated by an apolitical intelligentsia, to legitimate their aspirations towards mainstream credibility and acceptance of capitalist

hegemony. As such, postmodernism, and theories of postmodernity, represent little more than an ideological distraction from the business of serious social criticism and should be dismissed accordingly.

Conclusion

Despite the force of critique exemplified in Callinicos's denunciation of postmodernism, and the apparent tensions and contradictions in the idea of the postmodern, as we have tried to outline here, the questions it raises and the problems it presents have come to represent an integral dimension of the current social scientific landscape. As we have tried to stress, however, this chapter should in no way be taken to represent anything like an exhaustive overview of the ideas and debates that are currently shaping this particular landscape. Rather, it has sought to outline what we consider to be a number of important contributions which, we hope, will help to provide a framework within which to consider the relationship between the idea of the postmodern and the world of work and its organization in the following chapters. Let us try, then, to sum these up.

First and foremost, postmodernism appears to represent a shift in the intellectual and, broadly cultural, sensibility of the age. Whether manifest in Lyotard's 'incredulity towards meta-narratives', Foucault's equation of power/knowledge or Derrida's notion that there is nothing beyond the 'text', this sensibility renders problematic a range of Enlightenment-derived propositions about the nature of the world, and brings into question the idea that we can either know or intervene meaningfully in its reconstitution. Where such attempts are made they must be viewed reflexively, that is as little more than the outcome of a particular perspective based upon a contingent rather than a universal or ahistorical rationality. This, in turn, has led to the emergence of a particular political conviction that is perhaps best exemplified in the deconstructive approach of Derrida; that a postmodern politics of emancipation must seek to uncover and expose those acts of repression that the logocentric nature of modernist rationality has perpetrated in the name of representation and universality. Language and culture are viewed in this context as the primary site in which the repressed 'others' of western rationality can find a voice which has, up until now, been silenced. These 'others' may include the discourses of feminism, the cultural values of various ethnic identities and those dimensions of being that have been designated as the 'irrational' in human life such as sexuality and emotion.

With reference to the idea of a possible condition of social postmodernization exemplified in the writing of say Baudrillard, Lash and Featherstone, the emphasis here seems to lie on the prioritization of culture over other constitutive aspects of the social whole such as the economy, or indeed the collapse of such boundaries. This emphasis upon culture in turn reflects and reinforces the post-structuralist-inspired

conception of the de-centred subject as expressed to a lesser or greater extent in almost all accounts of postmodernism. Rather than culture emerging as the expression of shared norms and ideals constituted through inter-subjective social relations, subjectivity is viewed as the outcome of historically-located cultural discourses, most notably, in the contemporary age, of conspicuous consumption and the value of the sign. Furthermore, what unites all of these approaches is an attempt to reflect on the extent to which the institutions of modernity can endure, if it is the case that many of the very principles underpinning such institutions are no longer tenable.

Yet such philosophical meanderings are not the whole story, as we have seen. Postmodernism has also been understood as a socio-cultural response to what has been presented as a set of very real material developments. The growth in information technologies, combined with rapid developments in industrial production and financial exchange, have undoubtedly provided the impetus for a whole range of changes in the ways in which we experience the social world. Indeed, from this perspective, whatever postmodernity may encompass, there is little evidence to suggest that it implies a state of post-capitalism.

Bearing in mind that postmodern meta-theory continues to evolve and debates on the nature of postmodernity as a socio-cultural phenomenon remain subject to critical commentary, we now move to consider, more in keeping with the specific focus of the book, the impact that postmodernism has had upon the field of organization theory over the last twenty years or so. In doing so, we aim to bring together a wide range of material, and to try to make sense not only of how, but also of why, postmodernism and organization theory seem to have emerged as such accommodating bedfellows. Thus, many of the ideas and criticisms we have encountered so far will be re-visited and developed.

Notes

1 For a more extensive discussion of the relationship between modernism, modernization and modernity, see Berman (1983) and Featherstone (1988).

2 It would of course be inaccurate to suggest that a self-reflexive critique of what it is to be *modern* had not already been underway long before this current historical juncture. Intellectuals and writers from Hegel to Sartre, Nietzsche to Kafka have all, in one way or another, engaged with the tensions and contradictions of modernity. However, the point we are making here is that the nature of modernity *itself* was seldom addressed prior to the impact of postmodern ideas.

3 As noted, the emergence of the modern age is a disputed point. Alternative accounts have posited its birth with the seventeenth-century Renaissance while, more controversially, there have been those who have suggested that 'we have never been modern' (Latour, 1993), a point also raised by feminist critiques of the Enlightenment.

4 The first self-conscious engagement with the idea of the Enlightenment is to be found in Kant's essay of 1784 *An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'* (Kant, 1991), in which he viewed the Enlightenment as having offered humanity a way out of its 'immaturity'. That is, it had allowed humanity to discover the faculty of autonomous reason as the proper guide to action and behaviour.
5 For instance, de Condorcet, Diderot, Hume and Kant.
6 For example, Marx's critique of capitalism, it could be argued, rests primarily upon capitalism's growing 'irrationality' in the face of developing socio-economic conditions.
7 See, for example, the structural linguistics of de Saussure (1974) or the Marxist structuralism of Althusser (1969).
8 A term derived from the later work of Wittgenstein (1958).
9 Lyotard refers here specifically to the work of Daniel Bell and his writing on post-industrialism (Bell, 1973).
10 The question of whether deconstruction does in fact represent a methodological approach is, however, a contested one. It seems that what Derrida means by deconstruction differs from what Heidegger (from whom Derrida derives the term) means. With reference to Derrida's use of the term, it may be more appropriate to consider deconstruction as a 'sensibility' – a way of conceiving the world.
11 To describe deconstruction as a methodological approach, Sarup (1993) uses the analogy of the X-raying of paintings which attempts to discover, under the epidermis of the last layer of paint, another hidden picture.
12 Take, for example, this excerpt from the notes on the translation of his 1988 volume of selected writings: 'Baudrillard rarely provides full citations in his own notes. . . . At times Baudrillard's quotations have not been located anywhere in the text he cites' (Baudrillard, 1988a: viii).
13 Also see Lyotard's earlier observation that 'eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture: one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and 'retro' clothes in Hong Kong; knowledge is a matter for TV games' (1984: 76).
14 A term originating from the Marxist economist Ernest Mandel (1978).