

Within much postmodernist social theory there is often an embryonic and sometimes rather crude sociology of postmodernism. In Lyotard this takes the form of referring to the information revolution, the 'computerisation' of knowledge. In an argument which is perhaps not as far from Parsons's systems theory as many would like it to be, he suggests – as I understand it – that meta-narrative is undermined, or even destroyed, by the packaging of knowledge. Knowledge can be seen no longer as a value, but as something which has a use; and knowledge which cannot be so packaged will disappear. Anyone who is aware of what has been and is happening in universities in Western societies will recognise that he has a point; whether it is as dramatic as he claims is something to which I will return later.

Jean Baudrillard (whom David Harvey describes as 'never afraid to exaggerate') takes the dramatic nature of his claims much further; my own reaction to his work fluctuates between turning away in bewildered incomprehension and laughing at what often feels like a pleasant craziness. Modern society has progressed from copying the real object (the Renaissance) to reproducing it (consumer capitalism) to copying the processes of copying (the 'hyperreal', the postmodern). It is as if we have left any contact with the real world far, far behind, and our punishment lies in wait in eco-disaster, AIDS, and practically anything else he doesn't like. He calls this 'fatal theory', and it is expressed in increasingly obscure terms. His exaggeration, it seems to me, serves to obscure a very real point: that there is a sense in which some of us who live in the modern world are bound up with signs, with copies of copies of copies, in a way that does break our contact with something outside. The fact is that I make a major part of my living thinking, talking and writing about others' ideas, copying other people's copies of others' copies.

Jameson (1991) suggests two metaphors that capture postmodernism: the first is *pastiche* (copies of copies of copies) and the second, more interesting one is *schizophrenia* in Lacan's sense, where it can be seen as a breakdown in meaning. The points where meaning is fixed become loosened or disappear and we are left not with a 'chain of signification' but with a collection of unrelated signifiers, moving from one to the other in no particular order. It is this that makes postmodernist sociology difficult to understand, and it calls for a sociology of postmodernism. The *sociological* question is: why should people start thinking this way now?

THE SOCIOLOGY OF POSTMODERNISM

To talk about the sociology of postmodernism is, of course, to step outside postmodernist sociology, and implies a return to something like a causal explanation, even if the causal processes are obscure and undefined. I am going to look here at three 'explanations' of the phenomenon which vary in the way in which they see it, but do enable us to get a grasp on it, and beyond this to demonstrate some of the points I want to make about social theory as a whole. In fact these explanations are to some degree explanations of the developments in social theory over the past twenty years which I have noted in earlier chapters. It is not just the breakdown of structuralism that leads us in the direction of postmodernism, but also the disappearance from functionalism of its causal explanations and its 'opening up' in the work of Alexander; the development of symbolic interactionism, with all its relativist implications; the development and establishment of ethnomethodology – all are part of this process, and in intellectual terms there are links and common sources, particularly between interactionism, ethnomethodology and postmodernism.

To begin with, I want to go back to structuration theory, and in particular to Giddens's approach to modernism and postmodernism. Part of his emphasis on reflexivity is an analysis of the reflexivity of modernism; his emphasis on the uniqueness of the modern world centres on the way in which increasing areas of social life are no longer justified by tradition but have to be justified on rational grounds. This rational questioning increasingly turns in on itself; there is a constant process of undermining the grounds for knowledge, or at least for certain knowledge – in Lyotard's terms, we might talk about meta-narratives undermining themselves; the result is rather like what happens when one constantly questions oneself about one's own motives.

Beyond this, Giddens sees modernity in terms of time-space transformation: the standardisation of time and space and the 'disembedding' of our relationships from the specific features of time and space and our various attempts to 're-embed' them. I do not want to go any further into this at the moment, but I will be returning to these issues shortly; for the moment, I think I have said enough to show that Giddens sees postmodernism as a product of modernism itself – modernism, as it were, taken to its extreme, its latest stage. He argues that a 'true' postmodernism would involve a break from these