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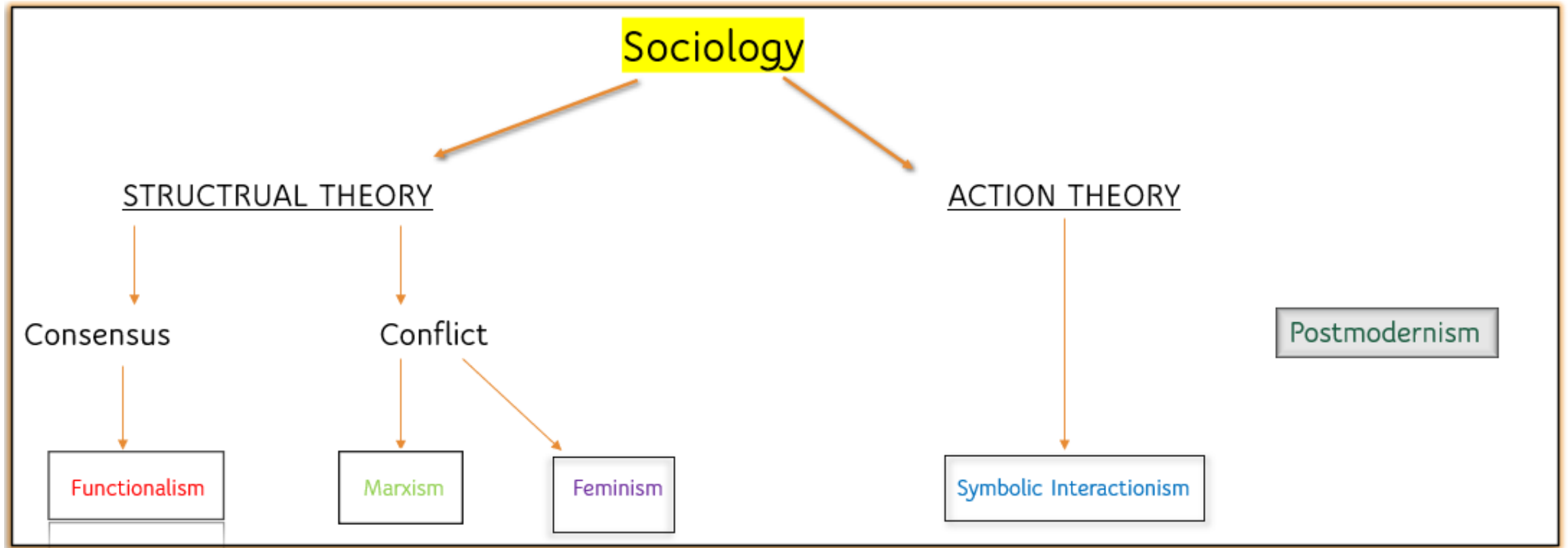
# ECISO4001: Understanding Society Postmodernism 2023

*Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau*  
*Transforming Education; Transforming Lives*



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# Sociological Perspectives



# Postmodernism

- Developed in the mid 20th Century
- Postmodernism denies it is possible to have a definitive theory of society
- Rejects structuralist perspectives (like Functionalism and Marxism)
- Knowledge is relative

# Poststructuralism

- Shares similarities with postmodernism
- Both emerged around the same time
- Poststructuralism can be seen as an example of postmodern thought
- Rejects structuralist ways of understanding society

# What's the difference?

- It can be difficult to separate postmodernism and poststructuralism

Postmodernism is a theory of society, culture and history

Poststructuralism is a theory of knowledge and language

# Modernism/Modernity

## Industrialisation- WW2 (ish!)

- From the Renaissance to WW2
- 16th and 17th century: Scientific development: categorisation of humans and animals
- Logic, reason and truth prioritised
- These were pursued through science
- Growth of human civilisations: the West led this
- Industrialisation (1830s-1850s) sped this up and advanced this process
- The start of the middle classes and capitalism
- Medicine, psychiatry and science were used to understand people
- Modernist purpose: to find the 'truth'

# Modernity and sociology

- Early sociologists wanted to use the scientific method
- Auguste Comte and Emelie Durkheim
- Think of Functionalism and Marxism
  - Positivist
  - Macro
- Postmodernism challenges these 'grand' theories

# Late modernity & liquid modernity

- Post WW2 – 70s (ish!)
- Capitalism had grown quickly and widely
- Anthony Giddens called this period 'late modernity'
- Zygmunt Bauman (2000 [1988]) stated we moved to from a 'solid modernity' to a 'liquid modernity'

# Late modernity & liquid modernity

## Solid Modernity

- Certainty
- Bureaucracy (order)
- Became Dehumanising
- Controlling and 'fixing' humans

## Liquid Modernity

- Uncertainty the only certainty
- Change the only permanence
- Rapid global change

# Postmodernism / Postmodernity

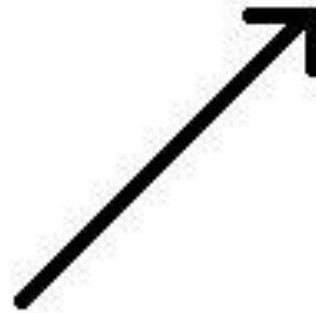
- Modernist concept of “truth” has gone
- Sees the world critically
- Modernism: Same universal goals and same access to justice
- Postmodernism: Multiple pathways and wealth of diversity in society
- There is no one “truth”
- Sceptical of those who say they know one “truth”
- As there are no more “new” ideas, no one “truth”, we put together old ideas into a pastiche
- Challenge authority

# PREMODERN



"Because God put it there and that's the way it's always been."

# MODERN



"Onwards and upwards with inevitable progress!"

# POSTMODERN



"Blpppggghljsdlkfjowejfalsk  
djflksdjflksjldjl;aldfkjdj;df"

# Key Theorists and Concepts



# Jean-François Lyotard (1924 -1998)

- Believed that postmodernism is the end of 'metanarratives'
- The big theories (like Functionalism or Marxism) to explain society
- Not just politics, but any set of beliefs
- People no longer a perfect society is possible
- Knowledge becomes the main source of power
- Knowledge breaks down into language-games
- Politics becomes linked to language games and less concentrated in the hands of state

(Haralambos and Holborn, 2013, p. 621)



“Furthermore, knowledge itself becomes evaluated according to whether it is useful, rather than whether it is true. That is, if knowledge can be used to achieve certain specific aims, then it is accepted, whether or not it can be shown to be true in terms of specific scientific theories”

(Haralambos and Holborn, 2013, p. 621)



# Michel Foucault (1926 -1984)

- Power and knowledge are intertwined
- The knowledge we have at any era is influenced by the power relations in that same era
- Power is not seen just at the macro levels (state / capitalists) but in all levels of society
- E.g., there are power relations between and individual their government but also between the individual and their employer, children, organisations etc.
- e.g., scientific knowledge is thought to exist separately from political and economic power but is it really? (i.e., climate change, Covid etc.)



# Foucault's work: His work included looking at the histories of madness / medicine / crime and punishment / sexuality

- History of Madness (2006 [1961]): historical understandings of 'madness'
- Renaissance: the 'mad' was seen as different, wise, revered and free to wander
- Mid 17th century: 'madness' was medicalised, institutionalised and needed to be 'cured'
- Birth of the Clinic (2003 [1963]): historical understanding of medicine
- Challenges the notion medicine became more humane
- 18th century: the 'medical gaze' when medicine became dehumanising
- Discipline and Punish (2020 [1975]): historical understanding of state punishment
- People think modern prisons are more humane
- Foucault argued modern power looks kind but isn't
- Prisons means that power is hidden, and people can't rebel

# Summary

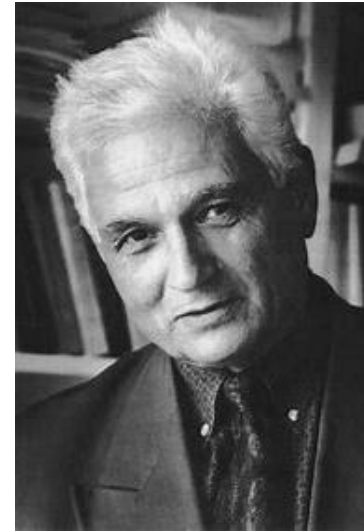
- Society, using, knowledge (e.g., science) has categorised people into “normal” and “abnormal”
  - Sane/insane; criminal/innocent/; heterosexual/homosexual
- These categories are not an intrinsic property but are a social construction
- Therefore, the “truth” is a contemporary way of understanding the world
- Knowledge (e.g., what ‘madness’ is) influenced the power relations (e.g., how the doctor treated ‘madness’)
- Foucault believed that “power is therefore not something someone has, but something that is done to others, an action that affects the action of others”

(Atkinson, 2015, p, 53)

# Jacques Derrida (1930 – 2004)

- Focused on the use of language
- Believed our belief systems were based on binary oppositions
- One is brought forward (superior), the other is suppressed (inferior)
- Therefore, we need to deconstruct these oppositions to challenge the ideology behind them

| Binary Oppositions |          |
|--------------------|----------|
| Good               | Evil     |
| Man                | Woman    |
| Rich               | Poor     |
| Abled              | Disabled |
| Beautiful          | Ugly     |
| Strong             | Weak     |



(Harlambos and Halborn, 2013, p. 123)

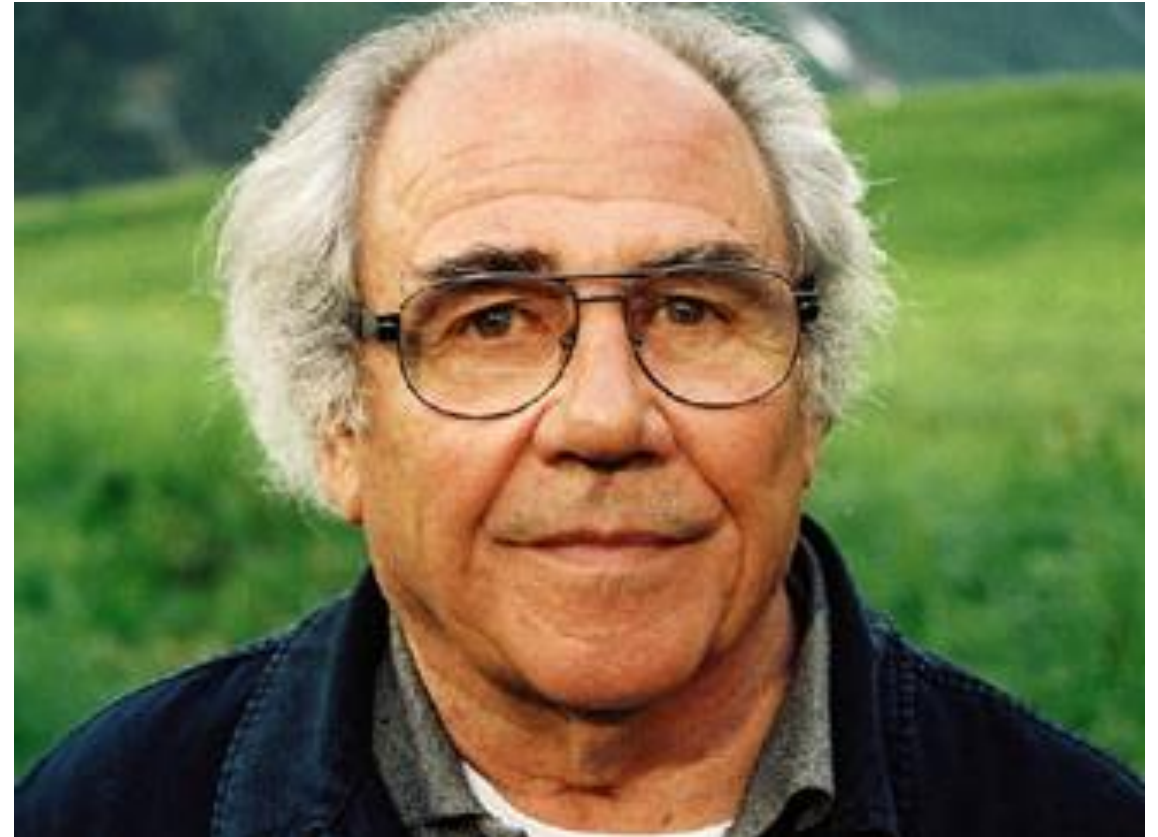
# Deconstruction

- We need to show the favoured word only has meaning in contrast to its opposite
- E.g., 'good' only means something to us because the concept of 'evil' exists
- Derrida wants to challenge (deconstruct) the meaning of binary opposites
- Then this will 'undermine the whole idea that binary opposition should
- form the basis for thinking about the world' E.g., 'woman' is usually seen as something that is not 'man'. We need to deconstruct what 'man' means to change the meaning of 'woman' and the meaning of gender.

(Haralambos and Holborn, 2013, p. 123)

# Jean Baudrillard (1929 – 2007)

- Simulacrum: images that have no original in reality (Baudrillard, 1994 [1981])
- We present a world which is seen as 'real' to us through electronic media / social media / mass media / commercialism
- These constructed realities are more appealing to us than reality
- The world becomes more superficial
- Hyperreality: "we no longer want the real experience of something, but the experience of being told about the experience about something – in a way that it becomes hyperreal, or more real than real" (Atkinson, 2015, p. 199)
- e.g., going to the cinema to enjoy the hyperreal experience of a film about a family reunion rather than go to our own (Atkinson, 2015)



# What do you think of when you hear “The Wild West”?

# The Wild West as simulacrum

- The representation we believe to be “The Wild West” bears no relationship to any reality
- It was produced through mediated images passed down to us over the past 150 years through:
  - Comics
  - Wild west shows (such as Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Shows that toured the world between 1883 and 1913)
  - Hollywood films (early 1900’s to the 1950’s)
  - Television shows (1950’s onward )
- Our perception of the wild is a mediated reality
- It’s one invented idea is layered on the next to produce a representation of reality that consists entirely of copies that have no originals except other copies.
- “The Wild West” is, in this respect, a representation of a representation - a copy without an original...

# The Wild West as Hyperreality

- Its representation that is “more real” than the reality it is meant to represent.
- Our beliefs about “The Wild West” are more real to us than the reality of this period in American history



# Examples:

- Hollywood films about the Vietnam war presented it as if it wasn't a failure of the US political system but failed because of the soldiers
- So, Americans watching these films are getting a 'reality' of the war that isn't real
- "Apocalypse Now" is simulacrum (a copy of real events) and this telling of the Vietnam war becomes the hyperreality (more real than real to us)
- It is difficult to distinguish reality from a simulation of reality
- Disneyworld: is it a real castle or a fake castle? Copy of imaginary world
- Scripted reality shows / YouTube / Social media 'influencers' / photoshop

# Zygmunt Bauman (1925 – 2017)

- Wrote 'Modernity and the Holocaust' (1989)
- Idealistic things (science, bureaucracy and reason) were used in catastrophic ways
- The 'tools' of modernity: efficiency and rationality were used in the holocaust (through science and bureaucracy)
- The bureaucracy had a dehumanising effect

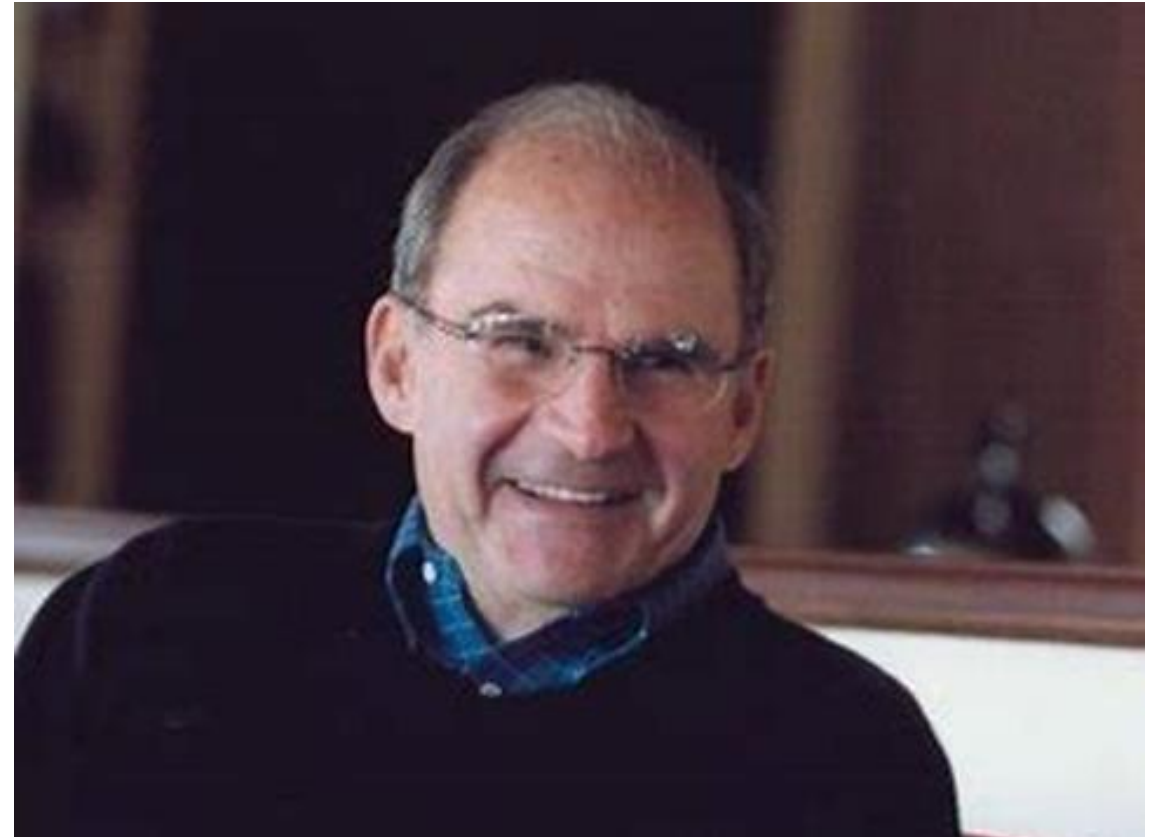


# Liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000)

- Globalisation, global capitalism, technology, the internet etc. has led to 'liquid modernity'
- The modernity idea that knowledge and truth will fix all social problems is no longer applicable
- Scientists, academics, experts' roles change if nothing is fixed, solid and certain
- For example, 'Fake news' / 'alternative facts' / climate change denial / epidemiologists during Covid
- Uncertainty in education / welfare / concept in the 'job for life' / zero hours contracts
- "Winners and losers"
  - Some benefit from this (the 'tourists': the elite / richer nations)
  - Some don't (the 'vagabonds': excluded from consumer culture / poor employment / unstable environments)

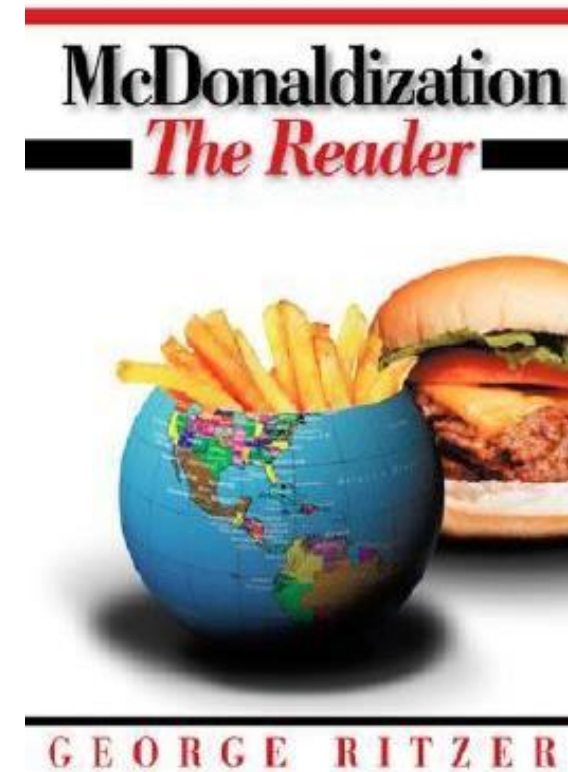
# George Ritzer

- The McDonaldization of Society (1993)
- Society functions with the same characteristics as fast-food chains:
  - Efficiency: managers minimising the time required to complete individual tasks required
  - Calculability: focus on quantifiable objectives rather than subjective ones (quantity over quality)
  - Predictability and Standardization: repetitive and production/service delivery processes/products/experiences that are identical
  - Control: management ensure workers appear/act the same. Also, use of robots and technology to reduce/replace human employees where possible.



# McDonaldization

- Effects our relationships / values / goals / worldview etc.
- It is a global phenomenon, driven by the West
- Eliminates skilled work force
- Workers easy to replace so have little bargaining power
- Reduced workers rights (think of the iPhones!)
- We are part of the process! (e.g., making flatpack furniture / self-service checkouts)
- Also relevant in education (e.g., tests and standards)





# Applying Postmodernism to society

- Crime

# Crime

- Carol Smart (1995) has used feminism and postmodernism to understand crime
- She argues that criminology has traditionally been positivist and seeking metanarratives
- Criminology has focused on masculine notions of control and domination
- She believes postmodern feminism can bring a new way of understanding crime
  - Challenge the metanarrative of crime
  - Challenge that all men and women are the same
  - Challenge the idea that 'there is an essence of humanity, masculinity of femininity that can explain crime'
- Accepts that 'crime' can mean different things, are committed for different reasons and 'criminal' is not one unified identity

(Haralambos and Halborn, 2013, pp. 425-426)

# Critiques

- Postmodernism is too focused on language and meaning (Philo and Miller, 2001)
- Sociology needs to focus on political and society (Philo and Miller, 2001)
- Giddens (1990) does not believe that we need to discard metanarratives
- He believes that we're living in an era of 'high-modernity' and 'post-modernity' is still waiting to exist

# Some key words

Metanarratives

Globalisation

Liquid Modernity

Power/knowledge

Deconstruction

Simulacrum

Hyperreality

Uncertainty

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