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Modernity

From the Promise of Modern Society to Postmodern Suspicions

What does it mean to be modern? When did the modern age begin? Are we modern? What should we make of the claim made by Bruno Latour (1993), a French sociologist of science, that “we have never been modern”? Or what did Peter Wagner (2008) have in mind when he asserted, “But modernity today is not what it used to be” (p. 1)? Further along these lines, how should we respond to those—a growing chorus in recent years—who assert that, although we did until recently, we no longer live in modern society? Instead, they claim, we have entered a distinctly new “postmodern” world (Lyotard 1979; Harvey 1989; Jameson 1991). Finally, how do we unpack Charles Lemert’s (2005) intentions in claiming that “postmodernism is not what you think”?

These and related questions preoccupy many contemporary sociologists, and appropriately so, given that sociology emerged as an effort to comprehend the form and content of modern society. The classic founders of the discipline who were discussed in Chapters 2 through 4—Marx, Weber, and Durkheim—are all theorists of modernity. Their insights into the nature of modern society have proven to be invaluable in making sense of the social world we inhabit. Moreover, the topics of the preceding three chapters address important facets of the modern condition. Modern society is made possible by industrialization and by advances in science and technology.

Democratic ideals and aspirations are intimately connected to modernity. Modernity reconfigures the relationship of individuals to other people and to their society by promoting individualism. Thus, modernity constitutes a synthesis of what we have been discussing; moreover, any of the trio of classic theorists could have appropriately been selected to introduce a discussion on this topic.

In recent years, however, it has become increasingly clear among scholars concerned with the history of sociology that one figure stands out as singularly important in helping us to comprehend modern culture and the varied ways it is experienced by individuals: the German sociologist Georg Simmel. His work is the focus of this chapter. David Frisby (1984) argued that “Simmel is the first sociologist of modernity. . . . [The reason for this assertion was that] no sociologist before him had sought to capture the modes of experiencing modern life” (p. 40). At the same time, while recognizing him as the sociologist par excellence of modernity, a case has also been made for viewing Simmel as a precursor to, or the first exponent of, a postmodern sociological vision (Bauman 1992; Weinstein and Weinstein 1993).

After providing some provisional definitions of key concepts and a discussion of Simmel, we discuss the work of his former student and leading figure of what became known as the Chicago School of Sociology, the American sociologist Robert E. Park. This leads us to an analysis of the controversial concept of postmodernity, in which the French social theorist Jean Baudrillard is the focus of attention. Following a brief examination of the work of Zygmunt Bauman, we conclude the chapter by exploring the idea of the “late modern age” as it has been developed by Britain’s most important contemporary social theorist, Anthony Giddens.

Modernity and Postmodernity: Provisional Definitions

If we are to make sense of these theorists’ claims, we need to have some idea of what kinds of culture we are talking about when we refer to both modern culture and postmodern culture. Thus, before we discuss Simmel, some definitional comments are in order. One thing is certain: Both modernity and postmodernity are notoriously difficult terms to define.

Modernity has often been viewed as being in opposition to and representing a break from tradition (Lyon 1994:19–21; Touraine 1995). If tradition looked to the past, modernity presumably turned its eye to the future. Modern culture is frequently associated, as Swedish social theorist Göran Therborn (1995) notes, “with words like progress, advance, development, emancipation, liberation, growth, accumulation, enlightenment,

embetterment, [and] avant-garde” (p. 4). One might add to this the idea that modernism is often depicted as an expansive, and thus global, phenomenon. The association with these terms suggests that modern culture possesses an optimistic orientation about our ability to collectively resolve problems, to remedy human suffering, and to enrich social life. It presupposes our ability to acquire knowledge of both the natural and the social worlds and to use this knowledge to beneficially control and mold these worlds. As Wagner (2008) sees it, until recently, “modernity was associated with the open horizon of the future, with unending progress towards a better human condition brought about by a radically novel and unique institutional arrangement” (p. 1).

Postmodernism is a term of relatively recent vintage. As the term implies, it refers to a cultural sensibility that occurs in response to, and chronologically after, modernism (Lyotard 1979; Smart 1992; Touraine 1995). Insofar as it signals a move from one culture to another, it is a parallel term to postindustrialism. Postmodernism, however, differs from postindustrialism because whereas postindustrialism is seen as an outgrowth of industrial society, postmodernism indicates an exhaustion of modernism. Although some postmodernist theorists dispute this claim, I fully agree with Robert Antonio and Douglas Kellner (1994), who wrote that “postmodernists provide a pessimistic vision of the current era” (p. 127).

Thus, the move from modernity to postmodernity is in many ways a shift from optimism to pessimism. This can be seen in the (I presume rather tongue-in-cheek) suggestion by Charles Jencks (as cited in Harvey 1989:39) that postmodernity began at 3:32 p.m. on July 15, 1972—the moment when St. Louis’s Pruitt-Igoe public housing project was dynamited into rubble (Figure 5.1). Built in the 1950s, this architectural award-winning project, designed by a disciple of the famous modernist architect Le Corbusier, was seen as far more than housing. It was construed to be a site where the problems of ghetto poverty could be solved and a place that would facilitate the sustenance of strong families, a vibrant community, active citizens, and economically productive employees. In short, the construction of Pruitt-Igoe was inspired by a modernist vision and hope.

In less than two decades, the project was primarily occupied by female-headed households mired in endemic poverty and dependent on welfare. It acquired a reputation as a dangerous, drug-infested, and crime-ridden place where residents moved out as soon as they could. Pruitt-Igoe came to be seen as part of the problem rather than part of the solution to inner-city poverty. Unable to envision any viable way to turn the project around, the local housing authority finally concluded that it had to be demolished (or, to use a term employed in other contexts by postmodernist theorists, “deconstructed”).

Figure 5.1 The Demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe Housing Project in St. Louis



SOURCE: Photograph by Michael J. Baldrige. Copyright © 1972 by *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Reproduced by permission.

Thus, the fate of Pruitt-Igoe came to be seen as a sign of the failure of the modernist project and, as such, the beginning of the postmodern age.

With these admittedly abbreviated contrasting definitions, we now turn our attention to the theorist par excellence of the modern condition and possibly of the postmodern era as well: Georg Simmel.

The Ambiguous Legacy of Georg Simmel

Simmel's place in sociology's pantheon of founding figures is far less secure than that of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim. He is less widely known than this trio among sociologists, is less frequently read, and has contemporary critics who refuse to see his work as being of equal value to the discipline of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim. He did not create a school of thought that could be inherited by subsequent generations of sociologists. Thus, there is no Simmelian sociology in the same way that there is a Marxist sociology, a Weberian sociology, and a Durkheimian sociology. When Talcott Parsons

wrote the draft for his monumental *Structure of Social Action* (1937), he included a chapter on Simmel, but before the manuscript appeared in print he had second thoughts about Simmel's importance and deleted that part of the manuscript (Jaworski 1997:45–60). Parsons, according to Donald Levine (2000), failed to appreciate the convergence of theoretical interests in Weber and Simmel and also failed to realize that Simmel had much to contribute to his own critique of utilitarian social action theory. Given the fact that this book played a significant role in defining the sociological canon, the omission of Simmel contributed for several decades to the relative devaluation of his work.

Simmel, however, was held in very high regard by many of his contemporaries. Weber, in particular, was impressed by the fecundity of Simmel's thought, and he intervened in efforts to advance Simmel's career. Durkheim and Toennies, although critical of aspects of Simmel's work, took him seriously. Simmel was highly esteemed by many influential American sociologists of the era, particularly those associated with the Chicago School of Sociology. Indeed, he served as an advisory editor of the school's influential *American Journal of Sociology*, and a substantial number of his essays appeared in translation in this publication. Although not a Marxist, he significantly influenced avant-garde leftist theorists such as Georg Lukács and Ernst Bloch (Leck 2000).

Academic Marginality

Part of the reason for the ambiguous reception of Simmel's work can be deciphered from the circumstances of his life. Born in 1858, he was the son of a prosperous Jewish businessman, a partner in a highly successful confectionery company. His father, who, like Marx's father, had converted to Christianity, died when Georg was a young boy. His relationship with his mother appears to have been strained and distant. He was raised by Julius Friedlander, a friend of the family and a prominent music publisher. The result of this upbringing was that although Simmel would remain financially secure throughout his life, he suffered, according to Lewis Coser (1971), from "a sense of marginality and insecurity" (p. 194).

His career choice parallels that of Weber and other sons who, in the words of Lawrence A. Scaff (2000), "fled the comfortable confines of . . . the wealthy upper middle class, for the speculative fields of science—a flight made possible in part by inherited wealth" (p. 252). Although he studied with some of Germany's most prominent academics and was seen by many as brilliant, his career was stymied. Unable to obtain a professorship, he had to content himself with remaining for years a *Privatdozent*, which meant

that he was a lecturer who derived his salary from fees assessed to students entering his lecture hall.

It is difficult to unravel all the reasons for this situation. Part of the problem may have been Simmel's willingness to question and challenge his professors, something they were simply not used to encountering from their students. Part of the problem may have been due to what was perceived to be the quixotic nature of his interests. For example, in 1880 he produced a dissertation titled "Psychological and Ethnographic Studies on Music." Part of this study took up the topic of yodeling. Perhaps as a result of what was considered by his professors to be an unusual interest, his dissertation was rejected, and he was forced to write on another topic.

Among the most oft-cited reasons for his failure to advance in the German academic system, however, is anti-Semitism. Indeed, as Poggi (1993) has observed, "German universities and other academic institutions . . . systematically placed obstacles on Jewish scholars' roads to academic success" (p. 42). Indeed, there is ample evidence that Simmel's Jewish ancestry (he was not a religiously observant Jew; indeed, he had been confirmed as a Lutheran) was held up as a rationale for denying him various academic appointments that he appeared eminently qualified to receive (Morris-Reich 2008). Simmel was also involved, at least for a time, in socialist circles, and these political sympathies may have contributed to his career problems.

Further compounding his problems may have been the fact that professors became jealous of his success on the lecture platform. He was a gifted lecturer, attracting large numbers of students. Furthermore, he challenged the status quo by permitting female students to attend lectures prior to the time when they were allowed to enter Prussian universities as full-time students. Moreover, the types of students he attracted were not pleasing to conservative German academicians because they included political dissidents, cultural modernists, and Eastern Europeans, who were seen as ethnically inferior (Frisby 1984:27).

The result was that until near the end of his life, Simmel remained in Berlin, the cultural and political center of Germany and a dynamic and rapidly growing metropolis. At age 56, when he finally obtained an academic chair at Strasbourg University, he left Berlin reluctantly. His move to Strasbourg coincided with the beginning of World War I, and from his new locale, Simmel became—to the surprise of many—an ardent German nationalist. He became increasingly disillusioned with the war as it progressed, which increased his sense of marginalization from his new academic home. Simmel described his life in Strasbourg as being akin to life in a monastery because he lived a "cloistered" life—remaining the academic outsider until his death in 1918 (Frisby 1981:32).

Simmel on the Culture of Modernity

Simmel can be regarded as the preeminent figure from sociology's formative era responsible for promoting cultural sociology, which Steven Connor (2000) describes as scholarship focusing on "art, literature, and aesthetic and cultural life more generally, seeking to explain these phenomena not on their own terms, but in terms of their wider significance in social life as a whole" (p. 352). Because he was a sociologist of modern culture, Simmel's thinking often appeared to be a reflection of what he took to be a central defining trait of modernity—namely, its fragmentary character. Known primarily as an essayist, Simmel, in his writings, provided finely textured descriptions, or snapshots, of various social types, such as the stranger, the miser, and the adventurer, as well as various types of social interaction, including exchange, conflict, and sociability. Suzanne Vromen (1990) points out that Simmel "stands alone [among the classic figures] as the one who explicitly questioned the future of women in modern society" (p. 319). He addressed topics usually not deemed to be sociological, such as what happens to the aesthetic value of a vase when a handle, which has a utilitarian character, is added to it.

Simmel's style was that of a detached observer (in this regard, there is a definite stylistic affinity between Simmel and Goffman). Unlike Marx or Durkheim, he did not appear to be interested in finding ways to change the world. Although he spoke about the tragedy of modern culture, his tone, while critical, was by and large devoid of the pessimism of his contemporary, Weber. Not surprisingly, he has been described as a sociological impressionist and a flâneur, given to acute descriptions of the passing scene but lacking an overarching view of the social totality (Frisby 1981:68–101; Weinstein and Weinstein 1993; Levine 1995; Axelrod 1977).

There is a growing appreciation among commentators on Simmel, however, of the fact that, underlying these shards, the bits and pieces of contemporary social life that he scrutinized, was a well-articulated and coherent theoretical framework. To illustrate this fact, I single out for attention two important foci in Simmel's writings. The first is money because Simmel considered modern culture to be undergirded by an economic system based on money. The second is the city because Simmel considered the modern metropolis to be the site where contemporary culture revealed itself in its most pristine and stark form.

Philosophy of Money

Although Simmel was not a systematic theorist, his magisterial and complex book, *The Philosophy of Money* ([1907] 1991), contains his most sustained

and coherent assessment of the form and content of modern culture and would serve as a framework for subsequent writings. In an advertisement that he took out to promote his new book (a common practice at the time), Simmel defined his intention as providing a complement to historical materialism. Rather than being concerned, as Marx was, with the material conditions—the economic factors—that led to the emergence of a money economy, he was primarily interested in discerning the varied ways in which a society predicated on a money economy transforms culture and in turn the individual's relations with others (Poggi 1993:62–68). Simmel sought to delineate the social psychology characteristic of a money economy, describing the varied ways that it structures our “internal and external lives” (Kracauer 1995:250).

Money, Simmel ([1907] 1991) pointed out, possesses no value in itself but functions as a tool to facilitate the exchange of goods and services. Money is instrumental, abstract, and impersonal. To cite one example of what he had in mind, in one widely cited passage of the book, Simmel observes that the monetary exchange between prostitute and client reinforces the fundamental character of prostitution, which entails “a wholly transitory connection, leaving no trace behind itself” (quoted in Poggi 1993:140). To borrow a term from Eva Illouz (2007), such encounters can be aptly described as “cold intimacies.”

Objectively, it is no more than a means to an end. Thus, money promotes a rational orientation toward the world, and here Simmel's discussion bears a distinct resemblance to both Marx and Weber. Simmel goes on to note, however, that this rationality can become distorted for some individuals who treat money irrationally as an end in itself. The miser, for instance, is a social type who “finds bliss in the sheer possession of money, without proceeding to the acquisition and enjoyment of particular objects” (Simmel 1971:179). For the spendthrift, however, “the attraction of the instant overshadows the rational evaluation either of money or of commodities” (p. 182).

Money, by removing emotional involvements from economic transactions, makes it possible to expand considerably the range of one's trading partners. It expands individual freedom by severing the all-encompassing ties to a primary group (e.g., the family or the tribe) and in so doing promotes an individualistic worldview. Money encourages the individual to be future oriented—to look at the world in terms of novelty and transitoriness—and thus it serves to undermine a respect for and an attachment to tradition.

Although all this is liberating, Simmel also sees a negative side to money. Money places a barrier between people and tends to become an absolute value in and of itself. More pointedly, he wrote, “The whole heartlessness of money mirrors itself in the culture of society, which it determines” (Simmel [1907] 1991:344).

The world was thus conceived to function in a cold, instrumental manner, with an underlying assumption that it is possible to regulate the social world and to give it order without considering the values, beliefs, and emotional orientations of the people who constitute the society. Simmel ([1907] 1991) succinctly captured this rationalistic character of social life in the following passage:

By and large, one may characterize the intellectual functions that are used at present in coping with the world and in regulating both individual and social relations as *calculative* functions. Their cognitive ideal is to conceive of the world as a huge arithmetical problem, to conceive of events and the qualitative distinction of things as a system of numbers. (pp. 443–444)

The consequence of this situation is that the modern world is characterized by a disjunction between objective (material) culture and subjective (individual) culture (Rowe 2005). At the individual level, this means that identity and the development of self can occur only by a process of distancing subjectivity from objective culture. In a manner that clearly parallels Marx, he refers to this distancing as alienation (Poggi 1993:202–203). At the collective level, Simmel viewed contemporary social movements, such as socialism and feminism, as well as aesthetic and quasi-religious movements, as responses to the alienating features of a money culture.

Social Differentiation in the Metropolis

Like Durkheim, Simmel was interested in the phenomenon of social differentiation; unlike Durkheim, who focused on the division of labor, Simmel was more interested in the ways social differentiation permeated all facets of everyday social relations. He observed that in primitive societies, individuals derived their identities from the group, and insofar as this was the case, there was considerable homogeneity among members. This changed in medieval Europe due to the existence of mediating institutions, such as professional guilds, that served as a buffer between the individual and the society at large. Nonetheless, although this made for greater heterogeneity in terms of the types of individuals in society, the individual's sense of identity was still largely determined by particular group identities.

The modern world changed this connection decisively. Simmel was fond of using geometric metaphors to describe social life, and in this connection, he spoke frequently about group affiliations as social circles. Unlike the premodern world, modern society is inherently pluralistic, which means that people live at the intersection of numerous social circles. Each of these various circles

occupies part of the time, energy, and commitment of the individual, with various kinds of affiliations being more or less compatible with other affiliations. In this milieu, the individual is accorded considerable autonomy and flexibility in negotiating the varied demands for allegiance by the social circles in which he or she voluntarily chooses to participate (Simmel [1908] 1955).

One of the significant changes that occurs as a result of the complex “web of group affiliations” that enmeshes the individual is that there are parts of the life of the individual that are hidden from the members of the differing groups in which the person is involved. The result is not simply that the distinction between the public and private realms becomes more pronounced but that the individual’s inner world can contain secrets that are not revealed even to one’s closest acquaintances and intimates.

Simmel was interested in the space where modern life was played out, and for this reason he was particularly interested in the city because modern society took form originally and evolved most deeply and completely in the metropolis. Although others among his contemporaries, such as Weber and the French scholar Fustel de Coulanges, had written perceptively on the city, Simmel was the first sociologist of modern city life. Biographically, this should not be entirely surprising because Simmel spent his early years in the center of Berlin at a commercial intersection—the corner of Friedrichstrasse and Leipzigerstrasse, which has been compared to New York’s Times Square—and in fact he remained in this rapidly growing and dynamic city for all but the last four years of his life (Coser 1971:194; Frisby 1992:99).

Because the money economy was crucial in shaping modern culture, and because it was in the metropolis that the money economy developed to its fullest, it was therefore in the city that one could expect to find modern culture most fully revealed. In an essay titled “The Metropolis and Mental Life” ([1903] 1971:324–339), published four years before *The Philosophy of Money* (Simmel [1907] 1991), Simmel provided an assessment of the impact of modern culture on the social psychology of urbanites.

In the essay, the reader will hear echoes of themes developed by both Durkheim and Weber. For example, Simmel raised the Durkheimian theme of the growth of interdependency in society. Although he agreed with Durkheim that this was due, in no small part, to the acceleration in the rate of occupational specialization, he thought that the need for intricate kinds of coordination was also brought about by the sheer density and complexity of metropolitan life. Simmel (1971:328) speculated on the kind of chaos that would bring commercial life in Berlin to a standstill if, even for an hour, all the watches in the city went wrong in different directions.

Likewise, the following introductory sentence of the essay (Simmel 1971) shares with Weber’s writings—although without using such pessimistic

imagery as that of the iron cage—a concern for the fate of the individual in the face of the progressive rationalization of the world:

The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life. (p. 324)

Like Weber, he saw the demands for punctuality, calculability, and exactness as arising out of forces of the modern world. He said that in the city, one finds a greater emphasis on intellectuality because reason replaces tradition and habitual action as a primary factor in shaping the conduct of everyday life. Paralleling Weber, Simmel evidenced a concern for the threat that modern culture, with its emphasis on instrumental rationality, posed for individual autonomy. Simmel, however, harbored no romantic longing to return to the organic wholeness of traditional societies, because he understood that, ironically, modern society both made possible individualism and served to undermine it.

He was keenly interested in exploring ways that people acted to ensure that they would not be overwhelmed by modern life. For instance, Simmel explained the characteristic reserve of urbanites—their blasé attitude—as a response to the flooding of the psyche by such a wide array of ever-changing stimuli that to do otherwise the individual would simply become overwhelmed (Simmel 1971:325–329). What some took to be the coldness or apathy of city dwellers, he saw as a necessary safeguard against the threat to individuality.

Tragedy of Culture

Simmel ([1892] 1977) understood the tension between the individual and the social structure through the lens of a philosophical position shaped by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, which depicted human existence in terms of a dualistic tension that pitted life against form. Life was seen as an unbounded force of creativity, whereas forms become the containers that constrain and harness life. Thus, all of human existence is an unremitting struggle by life to overcome form, but as life liberates itself from one form it inevitably confronts—indeed, creates—a new form. The logic of cultural production entails acts of creation and destruction. It is the necessity of the destructive character of this process that leads Simmel to speak about the “tragedy of culture” (Nedelmann 1991).

Simmel understood this in part in an ahistorical manner (Simmel 1950; Weingartner 1960). There was no possibility that this conflict could ever be

resolved or overcome. Quite simply, it was part of the human condition. Marxists, such as his former student Georg Lukács, criticized him for his tendency to treat culture in a timeless manner. More in line with what Lukács would want, however, Simmel, in his special fascination with the particular types of conflict found in modern culture, also appreciated the historically conditioned character of the dialectical process.

Although he seemed to agree in no small part with Weber's assessment of the oppressive character of bureaucratic rationalization, the social structural form giving shape to modern culture, his chosen focus was different because he was principally interested in examining the ways that people responded to the constraints imposed by modernity (Simmel 1971, 1984; Halton 1995).

Toward a Sociology of Leisure

Simmel was the first sociologist to turn his gaze toward the world of leisure and consumerism. This is evident, for instance, in an intriguing essay titled "Fashion" ([1903] 1971:294–323), in which he inquired into the reasons that changes in fashion—be it sartorial, culinary, artistic, architectural, musical, or other—occur so frequently in modern culture. The main reason for this, he claimed, was that the modern world is a "more nervous age" because it offers, in contrast to the past, such a wide array of consumer choices that make it possible for individuals to differentiate themselves from others. In other words, people will be attracted to new and different fashions at an accelerated rate as they seek to forge what they take to be a distinctive personal identity.

Fashion, however, is not simply a matter of individual choices. Rather, these choices are structured by class divisions and by social mobility. Simmel identified an antithesis between the desire for individual differentiation—for the desire to stand apart and to be unique—and the tendency toward social equalization—the willingness of all people, regardless of class position, to embrace reigning fashions—as being both a part of the motivation behind fashion choices and a reason for the unstable and generally short-lived career of any particular fashion (Simmel 1971:296; Nedelmann 1990; Lipovetsky 1994).

Simmel (1971) proceeded to make the following astute observation:

The very character of fashion demands that it should be exercised at one time only by a portion of the given group, the great majority being merely on the road to adopting it. As soon as an example has been universally adopted, that is, as soon as anything that was originally done by a few has really come to be practiced by all . . . we no longer speak of fashion. As fashion spreads, it gradually goes to its doom. (p. 302)

Simmel (1971:313–314) believed, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, that fashion is one way that individuals seek to preserve their “inner freedom.” Being willing to be dictated to and dependent on the external determinants of current fashions reflects a willingness to give up one’s autonomy, but this, he thought, pertains only to “the externals of life.” This willingness permits the individual to concentrate on preserving subjective freedom at its core (Weinstein and Weinstein 1993:101–129).

Similarly, he described the adventurer as a particularly modern social type. A person involved in an adventure seeks to step out of the mundane routines of daily life into a domain of activity with its own distinctive rules and rhythms. If the realm of work is the world of necessity, it is in the realm of leisure time that the adventure occurs. In a bureaucratized, rationalistic, and disenchanting world, the adventure provides the individual with the opportunity to be released—if only for a relatively short time—from the constraints of such a social order. The adventure promises excitement, innovation, and self-realization. The example Simmel cited to illustrate this is the clandestine love affair, with its alluring combination of eroticism and risk (Simmel 1971:187–198; Lyman and Scott 1975:147–158).

What he was addressing was a far more significant and pervasive aspect of modern life, an aspect heretofore generally neglected by sociological inquiry. Encompassed in the idea of adventure was a range of activities, including travel, sports competition, gambling, and outdoor activities such as sailing and mountain climbing. In short, Simmel’s sociology argued that modernity could be understood only if we sought to comprehend the dialectical relationship between work and play—between the realm of necessity and the realm of leisure (Simmel 1971; Sellaberg 1994:75–82).

Should Simmel be viewed as someone who articulated the contours of a new social formation without actually calling it postmodern, or should he be seen as someone who captured the impact of the transition from a pre-modern to a modern social formation in an era of rapid social change (Pescosolido and Rubin 2000)? With regard to whether we should consider Simmel to be a modernist or a postmodernist, I hope it is apparent, referring to the provisional definitions, that he does not appear to neatly fit the mold of either cultural orientation. This, as the long-time Simmel scholar Donald Levine (1985) has contended, is because the world we live in is one that is inherently ambiguous, and thus neither excessive optimism nor pessimism is warranted. Moreover, perhaps what we referred to as postmodern is, in fact, an aspect of the modern age: its dark side. Simmel, perhaps more than any other of the classic theorists we have considered, seemed to have appreciated the ambiguity of his age, and his sociology is, in effect, a profound reflection of this recognition.

Robert E. Park and the Chicago School

Simmel realized that because he did not bequeath a systematic sociological theory or method, his intellectual heritage would be, like coins, distributed to subsequent sociologists who would use them in many different ways and for many different purposes. Among the scholars most influenced by Simmel's thought was one of the most consequential figures during the formative stage in the development of American sociology, Robert E. Park. Although the way in which he was to become a pivotal figure in shaping what became known as the Chicago School of Sociology was a long and circuitous process, Park's singularly important role is beyond dispute.

Born in 1864, the same year as Max Weber, Park spent his formative years in the rather bucolic surroundings of Red Wing, Minnesota. The one significant event from his youth that Park enjoyed recalling in his later years was his encounter with Jesse James, when he provided the bandit with directions to the local blacksmith's shop (Raushenbush 1979:6). Park left Minnesota to pursue his undergraduate studies at the University of Michigan, where he took courses from the philosopher John Dewey. After graduation, he worked as a journalist for a number of metropolitan newspapers. This phase of his life ended when he returned to school, entering Harvard to continue his studies in philosophy. His mentors included such illustrious scholars as William James, George Santayana, and Josiah Royce.

Park's first encounter with sociology occurred when he, like so many of his compatriots of the era, traveled to Germany to study. It was at the University of Berlin in 1899 that he first encountered sociology, doing so by attending Simmel's lectures. In fact, these lectures would comprise the sum total of Park's formal instruction in sociology. Not surprisingly, Simmel was, as intellectual historian Fred Matthews (1977) wrote, "the most important single influence on Park's substantive sociological theories" (p. 34).

Park came to share Simmel's conviction that modernity would express itself most tangibly in the city. Apropos of this, Park (1950) once contended that the world could "be divided between two classes: those who reached the city and those who have not yet arrived" (p. 167). Park (1952) also wrote, in words that read as if they might have been penned by Simmel, that "in the city all the secret ambitions and all the expressed desires find somewhere an expression. The city magnifies, spreads out, and advertises human nature in all its manifestations" (p. 87).

Park's sociology of modernity would focus on the extraordinarily heterogeneous subgroups of urban dwellers. What set Park apart from his mentor was his keen interest in the racial and ethnic groups that migrated to cities during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This was a reflection of his

American roots because the significance of racial and ethnic differences was far more pronounced in American cities than in those in Simmel's Germany (Park, Burgess, and McKenzie 1925; Park 1950; Lal 1990; Kivisto 1990).

Before embarking on developing his own sociological vision, however, Park made another extended departure from academe. After returning from Europe to Harvard, he completed his dissertation based on a project he had begun in Germany. With a freshly minted PhD in hand, Park might have been expected to seek academic employment. Instead, he returned to his former profession as a journalist, this time as a freelance writer concerned with social reform.

During this time, Park became involved in the activities of the Congo Reform Association, an organization committed to educating the public about the cruel colonialist exploitation of the inhabitants of the Congo by Belgium, then under the leadership of King Leopold. He served as secretary of the organization and penned a series of muckraking journalistic exposés with provocative titles, such as "Blood-Money of the Congo" and "The Terrible Story of the Congo," which appeared in such popular publications as *Munsey's Magazine*, *Everybody's Magazine*, and *The World Today* (Lyman 1992; Kivisto 1993).

What was particularly revealing about these essays was the author's endorsement of his former professor William James's assertion that "progress was a terrible thing." Stanford Lyman (1992) referred to Park's critique as a "Gothic perspective," by which he meant that it "teaches its readers about the actual horrors that produce and prevail in the social construction of modernity" (p. 44).

Through his involvement in the association, Park met Booker T. Washington, the most important black leader of his era. Washington invited Park to work for him as a press agent at his educational institution in Alabama, the Tuskegee Institute. Park accepted and thus began a seven-year stint in the Deep South, where he functioned as a public relations officer and ghostwriter for Washington. During this extended period, the white northerner would learn much about the racial conditions of the American South and about a rural-based, African American culture (Matthews 1977:57–84; Raushenbush 1979:36–63). As a consequence of his involvement with Washington, he kept his distance from the most important African American intellectual of his era, W. E. B. Du Bois, whose political radicalism was antithetical to the reformism of Washington. Nonetheless, Park agreed with Du Bois about the importance of developing a leadership cadre for the black community, what Du Bois referred to as the "talented tenth."

Park's academic career began only after this extended apprenticeship. At age 49, he was hired by W. I. Thomas, then head of the sociology department

at the University of Chicago. Thomas's forced departure from the university a few years later due to his arrest on a morals charge (he was seen leaving a hotel with a woman who was not his wife) paved the way for Park to be elevated to the chair's position. For the next quarter of a century, he was perhaps the central figure in shaping American sociology. The Chicago School would be, in effect, the center of the sociological universe, with the city of Chicago serving as a laboratory for faculty and students alike. Near the end of his life, Park (1950:viii–ix) wrote that early in his career he came to view the sociologist as “a kind of super-reporter,” one committed to studying the “Big News,” by which he meant large-scale patterns and social processes. In a recent reconsideration of the approach to sociological research as urban reportage that Park instilled in his students, Rolf Linder (2006) has appropriately suggested that in this regard he viewed himself as “the city-editor.”

Race Relations in the Modern World

Central to Park's sociology was an awareness that the modern world brought together, via mass migration, a wide array of racial and ethnic groups from throughout the world who migrated to those nations at the center of the newly emerging economic world system, particularly the United States (for a recent account, see Kivisto and Faist 2010:13–33). Although some headed for rural frontiers in search of land, a majority of the immigrants arriving in the 20th century located in the burgeoning industrial cities, because it was there that genuine employment possibilities existed. Immigrants were compelled to adjust to their new social and cultural milieus and to the diverse groups they encountered (Park 1950, 1972).

Park was particularly concerned with delineating the processes of immigrant adjustment. Like political progressives of the era, he understood that in making the transition from their old world to the new, immigrants frequently experienced painful dislocations. The newcomers lived between two cultural spheres: No longer a part of their old culture, they were also not genuinely part of the new. This could result in what Park at various times called either “demoralization” or “personal disorganization,” which meant that neither social controls nor cultural values were effective in integrating the individual into society. This contributed to a variety of potential problems, such as mental illness, suicide, and criminal activity (Park and Miller 1921). Somewhat resembling Simmel's characterization of the stranger, Park saw the immigrant as a “marginal man” [sic].

Writing at a time when anti-immigration sentiment was at a peak in the United States, Park was a sympathetic defender of immigrants. He opposed conservatives who demanded the rapid Americanization of the newcomers.

From the view of these nativists, the new strangers at the door should be expected to abandon, quickly and entirely, their cultural roots. Like progressives such as Jane Addams at Hull House, Park urged tolerance and acceptance as an antidote to ethnocentrism (Deegan 1988).

Thus, in key respects, Park's thought also resembled that of contemporaries such as Horace Kallen and Randolph Bourne, both advocates of what the former termed "cultural pluralism." The cultural pluralists sought to preserve distinctive ethnic and racial groups; Kallen (1924) went so far as to suggest that democracy required such diversity. Bourne saw a particular vibrancy in immigrant culture that he hoped would revitalize what he perceived to be a rather static and unimaginative culture. Park thought of himself as a hardboiled realist, and he probably thought that Kallen and Bourne were in some ways hopeless romantics. Like this duo, Park appreciated cultural diversity and was an opponent of Anglo conformity. Unlike these two intellectuals, however, Park largely confined himself to depicting current realities and future trends, avoiding discussions that elaborated on his pluralist preferences.

Park also differed from cultural pluralists because he thought that, over time, it was unlikely that in many instances—particularly among European-origin groups—distinctive ethnic cultures could be preserved. When they did, they would likely become watered-down versions of the original. They were subject to change and to erosion because of interaction with other groups and because of the influence of the dominant national culture of America. Though he did not think it was inevitable, it was Park's conviction that assimilation was a very powerful force in America, casting into question the ability of distinct groups and cultures to persist into the indefinite future (Kivisto 2005:5–15).

In this regard, as Barbara Ballis Lal (1990) observed, Park was inclined to emphasize processes of social change at the expense of examining the durability of social structures. Ultimately, the process of assimilation is one that entails the gradual erosion of social and cultural heterogeneity. Lal refers to this as the "ethnicity paradox," by which she refers to Park's claim that active participation in ethnic communal life has the unintended consequence of assisting in the incorporation of groups and individuals into the larger host society. On this basis, Park challenged the forced assimilators noted previously, arguing instead that policies of cooperation, tolerance, and voluntary action would over time ensure the incorporation of ethnics into the mainstream of American society and culture (Park and Miller 1921; Park 1922, 1950; Lal 1990).

At the same time, Park thought that ethnic identities could persist into the future, contending that many of his contemporaries had "greatly

exaggerated” the extent to which assimilation was based on homogeneity and like-mindedness. Indeed, under the clear influence of both Simmel and Durkheim, he understood modern civilization as entailing the freeing of individuals from many of the constraints imposed by both ethnic groups and the national society as a whole. What this meant for group life was the emergence of what Park (1914) called “cosmopolitan groups” (p. 606; see also Winant 2000; Kivisto 2003a). Park’s thought has more in common with contemporary discussions about multiculturalism than has been heretofore appreciated.

Race as a Social Construct

It is a truism among contemporary scholars that race is a social construct. This can be seen, for instance, in the approaches of scholars such as Stuart Hall, Patricia Hill Collins, Homi Bhabha, Paul Gilroy and many others who emphasize the fluid, hybrid, and contested character of racial identities. In this regard, Park was a path breaker insofar as he was one of the first sociologists to abandon biological explanations of race relations. He insisted that people of color must be understood in cultural, rather than biological, terms (Kivisto 2003b). For example, he observed that at the same time that mass immigration of Europeans across the Atlantic was taking place, a parallel migration was occurring as African Americans were migrating from the rural South to the urban North. It was his view that these two migrations could be understood in fundamentally the same way. In both cases, an essentially peasant folk from premodern, preindustrial communities was entering, and being forced to adapt to, a modern, urban, industrial milieu.

Earlier in his career, Park thought that assimilation was so powerful a social force that as diverse peoples came into contact with each other in the modern world, they would inevitably be caught up in what Park once called the “race relations cycle.” This was a four-stage process leading from initial contact to intermediary stages of conflict and cooperation and resulting in assimilation (Park 1950; Lyman 1968). Thus, modernity was viewed as a great force promoting societal integration. Park also saw, however, that conflict and resistance to inclusion seemed to be capable of persisting indefinitely. He was acutely aware of the fact that race and racial differences—as social constructs and not as biological realities—played a profound role in perpetuating group differences and in putting a break on assimilation.

At the interpersonal level, Park understood what race differences could mean for intergroup relations. In an insightful essay titled “Behind Our Masks” (1950), he explored the implications of race relations in situations in which people are compelled to wear their race like a mask. The essay is

in part indebted to his former teacher, Simmel, particularly his essay “The Aesthetic Significance of the Face” (Simmel 1959:276–281), and in part to the pre-Harlem Renaissance poet Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem, “We Wear the Mask” (1974). Park contended that in societies in which racial differences are considered especially significant, people wear their race like a mask. As a result, people from other races see the person merely as an essentially interchangeable representative of the race. In effect, people look across racial divides and proclaim, “they all look alike to me.” Thus, racial masks prevent people from being seen as individuals. Park concluded by suggesting that in such societies, race relations will be characterized by considerable tension and conflict.

Because Park agreed that individualism was a characteristic feature of modernity, racialized barriers to its expression could appropriately be seen as vestiges of premodern, or traditional, culture. Earlier in his career, Park thought that as modernity uprooted tradition, race would decline in importance and class would become more important. Park emphasized the inevitability of conflict in social life and thought that race conflict would increasingly give way to class conflict as a divisive factor in contemporary life. In his later years, however, he seemed to realize that race could potentially continue as a potent social force long into the future. He did not share Parsons’s idealism about the prospects for resolving America’s racial dilemma.

Park was not so pessimistic, however, as to conclude that race was an intractable social problem. He saw in the crucible of the modern life, the city—with its social differentiation, mobility, and fragmentary characteristics—new kinds of social relations emerging that had the potential of rendering race a less salient force in social life. Likewise, advances in mass communication were seen as having the potential to reduce levels of group isolation and encourage greater tolerance (Matthews 1977:157–174; Smith 1988:123–131). Thus, like Simmel, Park’s understanding of modern culture does not contain an unbridled optimism. Rather, its tempered endorsement of modernity was the result of his awareness of the paradoxical character of the age.

Park trained a generation of sociologists, many of whom would in turn become major forces in the discipline, including Herbert Blumer, the founding figure of the theoretical perspective known as symbolic interactionism, and Everett C. Hughes. Both in turn trained another generation of graduate students. A hallmark of Chicago School sociology was its devotion to ethnographic research, which entailed careful and rich descriptions of discrete slices of social life. Thus, a partial list of research by Chicago School graduates includes accounts of hoboes, race relations in small towns, the taxi

dance hall (usually a front for prostitution), the real estate industry in Chicago, the medical profession, gangs, jackrollers (i.e., muggers), the public school, and the medical profession. One of the characteristics of the research tradition that was in no small part initiated by Park was its recognition of the Janus face of modernity. Chicago School sociologists saw the positive features of modernity, and they embraced its cosmopolitan and universalistic features. At the same time, they were sensitive to the negative aspects of the modern condition and the discontents that it generated.

Postmodernism and Sociological Theory

The word postmodernism has been around for some time. For example, C. Wright Mills (1959) proclaimed, without much elaboration about what he meant, that “the Modern Age is being succeeded by a postmodern period” (p. 166). Although the word has surfaced in various other places since Mills’s proclamation, postmodernism did not burst onto the academic stage in the United States until approximately a quarter of a century ago—imported from its French literary and philosophic progenitors. Nevertheless, in its brief and highly contested history, it has had a pronounced impact on certain fields, particularly in literature, in which many of its most influential advocates occupied at various points in the recent past prestigious chairs at elite universities, such as Stanley Fish at Duke University and Huston Baker, Jr., at the University of Pennsylvania and later at Vanderbilt University. Postmodernism, however, filtered into sociology slowly and with less impact than on some other fields (Rosenau 1992; Gottdiener 1993; Kivisto 1994; Seidman 1994).

Insofar as postmodern theorists focus particular attention on culture, they are located in a lineage of sociological thought dating back to the cultural sociology of the formative period, particularly in the work of Simmel but also in that of Durkheim. This lineage also includes various subsequent theoretical approaches, such as those contained in the German Frankfurt School (especially the work of Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin) and the French College of Sociology (particularly Georges Bataille and Roger Callois) and those of mass society cultural critics (Eagleton 2000; Cormack and Cormack 2002; Richman 2002). It is important to note that we are interested in what it means to speak about the postmodern as a theory of culture (Lash 1990; Touraine 1995). Thus, we are not interested in the epistemological claims of postmodernism. Likewise, the postmodernist mode of literary criticism, known as deconstruction, is not of concern here (Derrida 1981; Agger 1990; Jameson 1991; Rosenau 1992).

There are a number of interpretive difficulties entailed in coming to terms with the idea of postmodern culture. First, postmodernist theorists often disagree with one another about the parameters of postmodernism. For example, Norman Denzin (1991), a sociologist whose thinking took the postmodern turn, provided a number of definitions of the term postmodern, one of which was that it is “undefinable” (p. vii). Second, postmodernists all too frequently write and speak in an impenetrable jargon, and thus their ideas sometimes appear to be comprehensible only to those who are initiated into the mysteries attached to such concepts as antifoundationalism, Logocentrism, hyperreality, and simulacra. A third reason, clearly related to the second, has to do with the French intellectual origins of postmodernism. In these there is a tendency to accentuate the novelty of the claims being made and the positions being staked out—phenomena resulting from the peculiar intellectual fashion consciousness in France.

We examine two interrelated themes that have, in varied ways, preoccupied some of the central figures associated with postmodernist thought: the critique of “grand narratives” and the blurring of the distinction between the real and the “hyperreal.”

The Exhaustion of Grand Narratives

Grand narratives, in postmodernist discourse, refer to large, panoramic accounts or explanations of current social circumstances and future trends: Marx on the logic of capitalist development, Weber on rationalization, Durkheim on the development of organic solidarity, and Parsons on the progressive inclusion of marginalized groups in the social and cultural mainstream are examples of grand narratives that we explored in previous chapters. However different these theories might be, they share the Enlightenment conviction that we have the ability to make sweeping generalizations about the social world we inhabit, and with the understanding obtained by these grand narratives, we have the power to change society for the better (Best and Kellner 1991:8).

Postmodernists cast suspicion on these convictions. The French theorist Jacques Derrida, for example, sees the construction of grand narratives as the product of what he refers to as “logocentrism,” by which he means modes of thinking that refer truth claims to universally truthful propositions. In other words, our knowledge of the social world is grounded in a belief that we can make sense of our ever-changing and highly complex societies by referring to certain unchanging principles or foundations. The postmodernist stance articulated by Derrida (1976, 1978) calls for a repudiation of logocentrism, which entails taking what postmodernists refer to as an

antifoundational stance. In its most extreme versions, postmodernism constitutes a profound repudiation of the entire Western philosophical tradition and represents a form of extreme skepticism about our ability to carry on the sociological tradition as it has been conceived since the 19th century.

One might reasonably conclude that postmodernism is a contemporary form of nihilism—an anomic state characterized by a loss of meaning and a loss of faith in our ability to translate theory into practice. The Enlightenment belief that a more rational world would lead to a more humane world is abandoned. Given this, postmodernism could be seen as encouraging escapism and political passivism or an irrationality that promotes reactionary political positions (Callinicos 1989; O’Neill 1995).

Political Orientation of Postmodernists

What is somewhat surprising is that many postmodernists see themselves as situated on the political Left and, as such, as sympathetic to various progressive political movements: anti-imperialism, feminism, gay liberation, and so on. An example of how such a deconstructionist postmodernism proceeds, however, can provide a sense of its limited utility for leftist politics. In an essay titled “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), Gayatri Spivak contends that it is important to hear the voices of powerless, marginalized people rather than allowing more privileged and powerful voices to attempt to speak on their behalf. Spivak is an Indian feminist teaching in the United States, and she has served as a translator of Derrida’s work. In this particular essay, she addresses the traditional Hindu practice of *sati* (or *suttee*), in which the widow climbs onto her dead husband’s funeral pyre and immolates herself.

During British colonial rule, the practice of *sati* was outlawed by colonial authorities. Spivak criticizes this act, claiming that it is a reflection of a desire to impose Western values on Indian society and as such is a form of cultural imperialism. The result was that the voices of the subaltern women were not heard. The colonial authorities failed to comprehend the women’s belief that they were acting virtuously in performing this moral obligation. Spivak does not purport to defend *sati*. Rather, her intention is to criticize the British for presuming that their values should be seen as universal values, applicable to people everywhere. Such universalistic claims, she suggests, can only be the product of a worldview that is thoroughly logocentric.

In Spivak’s thesis, one sees the linkage between postmodernism and those multiculturalists who contend that differing cultures can only be understood and evaluated on their own terms. Antifoundationalism thus merges with extreme cultural relativism. In the process, critics contend, it becomes

impossible to make a case for universal human rights or to respond to charges of Eurocentrism. Antifoundational postmodernism undercuts the moral grounds to challenge such phenomena as the torture of political dissidents by African military strongmen, infanticide in China, and female genital mutilation practiced in many Islamic countries (Callinicos 1989:78–79; Kivisto 1994:726–727).

Ultimately, cultures are viewed as being discrete and incommensurate. There is no shared language that permits people to transcend local cultures and the parochialisms they embrace. In other words, if postmodern theorists are correct, we have entered an era characterized by what Todd Gitlin (1995), a critic of postmodernism, plaintively describes as “the twilight of common dreams.”

Thus, the end of grand narratives signals the exhaustion of the modernist project, with its conviction that human knowledge could be used to remedy problems in both nature and the social world and, in the process, to facilitate more humane and sustainable societies. We arrive at a state of, as Durkheim called it, pervasive anomie.

The Real and the Hyperreal in Postmodern Culture

Whereas Marx and a tradition of sociological inquiry stemming from his thought have been preoccupied with the realm of production (e.g., with the factory system and with the conditions confronting the working class), postmodern theorists have turned their attention toward the realm of consumption. Indeed, one of the main claims of postmodernists about the transition from modern culture to postmodern culture is that people should be perceived as consumers rather than producers. Moreover, in advanced industrial (or postindustrial) societies, the sheer plenitude of goods and services available is seen as creating heretofore unimaginable consumer choices and with these choices a proliferation of new means of consumption (Ritzer 1999). Jean-François Lyotard (1979) wrote,

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. (p. 76)

Baudrillard on Disneyland as Paradigm

Contemporary culture in the advanced industrial societies is often characterized as being saturated by the media, entertainment, and new information

systems. What are the implications of this saturation? Jean Baudrillard (1981), a former professor of sociology at the University of Nanterre who broke from his Marxist past to stake out his place among postmodern theorists, has argued that this saturation has resulted in a world in which the difference between the real and the images, signs, and simulations of the real has dissolved. This leads to the creation of what Baudrillard refers to as *simulacra*—reproductions or simulations of the real that are difficult or impossible to distinguish from the real. His argument parallels that of his contemporary Guy Debord, author of *Society of the Spectacle* (1983), which begins with the claim that today “all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles” (para. 1).

The result is the emergence of what Baudrillard refers to as *hyperreality*. The term is meant to imply something that is at once not real and more real than real (Baudrillard 1983). Steven Best and Douglas Kellner (1991) provide the following illustration of what Baudrillard means with regard to hyperreality:

In “TV World,” for instance, the image or model of the Doctor (the simulated Doctor) is sometimes taken for the real doctor; thus Robert Young, who played Dr. Welby, received thousands of letters asking for medical advice and later appeared in ads where he advised readers on the wonders of decaffeinated coffee. (p. 119)

Although this example illustrates how the image comes to be seen as real—to merge with the real—Baudrillard also asserts that the postmodern era is characterized by the creation of simulacra, hyperreal social worlds that do not rely or depend on a “real” referent. Although one can point to the food in fast-food restaurants, theme parks, and shopping malls as instances of simulacra, the purest example, according to Baudrillard (1988), is Disneyland because the Magic Kingdom is not a copy and does not purport to refer to a reality outside of Disneyland.

Although nonpostmodern analysts of culture can concur with much of what Baudrillard has stated to this point, he proceeds to make sweeping generalizations that leave him open to criticism. This penchant for gross generalization is evident when Baudrillard (1983) remarks,

Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation. (p. 25)

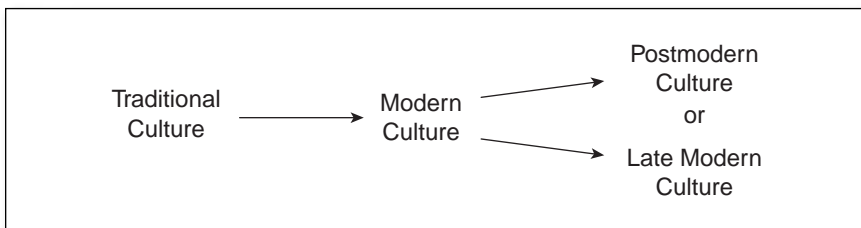
Recall that although Simmel saw leisure as an increasingly important arena of social life, he nonetheless maintained that leisure activities were set apart and distinct from the mundane world of work. In stark contrast,

Baudrillard suggests that this distinction today is meaningless because he views the world almost entirely in terms of consumption. Thus, in making a complete break with his own Marxist past, Baudrillard (1983) writes,

You are no longer brutally removed from daily life to be delivered up to machines. But rather you are integrated: your childhood, your habits, your human relations, your unconscious instincts, even your rejection of work. . . . In any case, you will never be left on your own . . . the die is cast . . . the system of socialization is complete. Labor power is no longer violently bought and sold; it is designed, it is marketed, it is merchandised. Production thus joins the consumerist system of signs. (p. 134)

It is not easy to determine what Baudrillard's attitude is about postmodern culture. Jeffrey Alexander (1995) considers him to be "the master of satire and ridicule, as the entire Western world becomes Disneyland at large" (p. 27). Stuart Hall thinks that Baudrillard celebrates postmodernity, whereas Douglas Kellner sees in his work a fatalistic bemoaning and acceptance of the existing new social order, although it is a nightmare (Gane 1991; Smart 1992:131) (Figure 5.2). What is clear is that Baudrillard is less inclined to develop the conceptual tools that others might find useful in cultural analysis and more inclined, as Kellner (2000:751) suggests, to serve as a "provocateur," challenging much of classical and contemporary social theory.

Figure 5.2 Competing Assessments of the Fate of Modernity



Easier to discern is Baudrillard's rather unflattering portrait of the role of individuals in postmodern culture. We appear to have been reduced to the roles of mall rats in quest of objects of desire and excitement, couch potatoes playing with the TV remote control, and voyeurs peering into the private lives of the rich and famous. We are, as the previous quotation indicates, thoroughly enmeshed in our social worlds but incapable of controlling them or of operating in a genuinely autonomous way.

This view of social actors is far removed from Marx's vision of the potential for beneficial change arising from collective action. It signifies the demise of the autonomous individual at the center of attention in a tradition of thought from Durkheim to Bellah. It goes beyond Weber's pessimistic assessment because Weber still held out hope that people could act in constructive ways to resist the iron cage. Finally, Baudrillard's views are distinctly at odds with Simmel's appreciation of the individual choices people can make in the ongoing dialectical tension between life and form. The implicit message of Baudrillard's work seems to be that we should passively accept—and even enjoy to the extent that we can—the spectacle and the carnival that is post-modern culture.

Because signs no longer refer to real referents, because the real has collapsed into the hyperreal, meaning has evaporated. In a rather notorious instance of applying this thinking to a concrete event, Baudrillard (1991) claimed that the Gulf War was nothing more than a television and computer graphics spectacle—the difference between this war and the war games in a video arcade presumably having essentially disappeared. Of course, there is an element of truth to this claim. Indeed, a similar claim was made by Slovenian theorist and fellow provocateur Slavoj Žižek (2002) about the war in Afghanistan that took place in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, which he depicted as “a virtual war fought behind computer screens” (p. 37). Lost in Baudrillard's vision, however, as David Lyon (1994) pointedly noted, is the fact that there really (i.e., not hyperreally) were “blood-stained sand and bereaved families” (p. 52). Lost, too, are beliefs about patriotic duty, geopolitical realities, the economics of oil, and similar very real considerations that lead nations into war. In his book on terrorism, which is described in the subtitle as a “Requiem for the Twin Towers,” Baudrillard (2002) describes Al Qaeda's attack on the United States in terms of the “symbolism of slaughter” and “sacrificial death” as a mode of challenging American hegemony. Again, he treats a bloody event only as a spectacle—or as he describes it elsewhere as “war porn”—and not as the consequence of a complex interplay of political, economic, and social forces that underlie the spectacle (Baudrillard 2005).

Forget Baudrillard?

Baudrillard, who once urged readers to “forget Foucault,” was himself the subject of an edited collection titled *Forget Baudrillard?* (Rojek and Turner 1993). The difference was the question mark, for the contributors in a sympathetic but critical way attempted to determine whether or not his work would manage to exert an influence over social theory in the foreseeable future.

My criticism of Baudrillard revolves around the obvious point that there is a reality that people experience, emotionally respond to, and attempt in some fashion to shape. There is a life outside the television set and outside cyberspace. The emotionless and meaningless worlds depicted in films such as David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* and Quentin Tarantino's films, from *Pulp Fiction* to *Inglourious Basterds*, are not synonymous with our lived experiences, nor do most people confuse the two (Best and Kellner 1991:137–144; Bauman 1992:149–155; Denby 2009).

Although it is certainly true that the world of consumerism has changed considerably in recent years, and that this world deserves more sociological attention than it has previously received, little evidence can be mustered to claim that we have left modern culture for postmodern culture. The continued potency of religious belief, for example, calls into question the pervasiveness of meaninglessness Baudrillard envisions. The existence of the new social movements concerned with such issues as the environment, peace, feminism, civil rights, and poverty also calls into question the extent to which people in advanced industrial societies have opted for political passivity and escapism.

By claiming that we have moved from production to consumption, this version of postmodernism shows evidence of a serious blind spot. It is obvious that goods continue to be produced, although in a global economy this might mean that they are being produced in poor countries, where workers (frequently including children) are paid abysmal wages and are forced to work exploitatively long hours in unsafe and unsanitary factories. The clothes purchased at the mall and the athletic shoes pitched in television and magazine ads by celebrities such as Spike Lee and a cast of NBA stars are the products of this darker side of our contemporary culture. Moreover, as Alex Callinicos (1989) has pointedly noted, most of the world's inhabitants are excluded from the consumerism Lyotard and Baudrillard describe, including poor people in the advanced industrial societies, who have only a limited involvement in this kind of consumption.

In a generous assessment of Baudrillard that appeared shortly after his death in 2007, Robert Antonio (2007) pointed out that Baudrillard's abandonment of leftist politics was a reflection of his assessment of the failure of the 1968 student/worker protests. This event led to his the abandonment of the Marxist dream of a radiant future. Unlike Žižek (2008), whom some continue to describe as a Marxist, Baudrillard was not inclined to argue "in defense of lost causes." Nor was he prepared to endorse the anti-utopian pragmatism of liberal democracy. Rather, in relentlessly promoting his often contradictory but deeply pessimistic diagnoses of our times, he became a media star, which included homage to him in the first movie of the *Matrix*

trilogy and a U.S. lecture tour that was part of the Institute of Contemporary Arts' "Big Thinkers" series. He played a major role in creating and sustaining the postmodern moment, but near the end of his life he claimed that the term that best defined him was nihilist.

Liquid Modernity

Baudrillard was the most explicit and insistent advocate of radical postmodernism (Lemert 2005). It's important to note that other postmodernists have offered more tempered assessments of the postmodern condition, viewing it in many respects as a new phase of modernity rather than constituting a radical rupture between past and present. No one better exemplifies this position than the Polish-born sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. Born in 1925, he lived through the dark times of the Nazi era and supported the communist takeover of Poland after World War II. His intellectual trajectory led him from orthodox Marxism to critical neo-Marxism, which also entailed a shift from being complicit in the regime to becoming a dissident intellectual whom the authorities viewed with deepening suspicion (Edemariam 2007). When he lost his job as a result of anti-Semitic purges of universities in 1968, he and his family settled in England, where he took up an academic post at Leeds University, remaining there until his retirement.

A prolific author, Bauman commenced on what appeared to be virtually a new career once he had retired, rapidly churning out book after book. During the 1990s, he published a series of books explicitly devoted to postmodern concerns, writing, for example, about postmodern ethics and morality, as well as the discontent generated by the postmodern condition (Bauman 1993, 1995, 1997). Of particular emphasis in these theoretical reflections is an appreciation of the significance of ambivalence in postmodernity. Peter Bielharz (2009) sees a parallel between Bauman's thought and that of Simmel, contending that in both one finds a commitment "to the idea of *ambivalence* as a central orienting device and motif of modernity" (p. 97).

By the turn of the century, Bauman (2000) opted to replace the term postmodern with the idea of "liquid modernity." Perhaps to avoid the confusions and incessant debates about postmodernism and perhaps also to distance himself from postmodernism's more radical proponents, this original term can be seen as useful in carving out an intellectual space in which to articulate his own position. Agreeing with the claim that grand narratives have ceased to be compelling, Bauman (2007) sees the present as an "age of uncertainty." The preceding stage of modernity can be characterized as "solid." In

contrast, the current stage is “liquid” insofar as patterned social conduct and the social structures essential to making such forms of everyday social relations durable no longer exist. Instead, we live during times in which these structures no longer keep their shape for very long, “because they decompose and melt faster than the time it takes to cast them.” The consequence is that structured forms today “cannot serve as frames of reference for human actions and long-term life strategies because of their short life expectations” (Bauman 2007:1).

In short, people in the contemporary world are consigned to living out their lives with a far greater focus on the present and immediate future rather than with the “open horizon of the future” that Wagner (2008:1) associated with the early phase of modernity in a passage cited at the beginning of this chapter. Today it is essential to be flexible in order to address the more immediate contingencies of situation. Our lives cannot be seen as epic novels, but rather as a series of discrete short stories.

What makes Bauman so dramatically different from someone like Baudrillard is that his assessment of our current condition does not lead him to nihilism. On the contrary, he thinks that, today more than ever before, ethical conduct must be grounded in a sense of personal responsibility. We may live in uncertain times, but we don’t live in amoral times. It’s for this reason that Bauman continues to define himself as a socialist. In an interview in *The Guardian*, he explained to Stuart Jeffries why his commitment persists by contending that he has always believed that “you do not measure the health of a society by GNP but by the condition of the worst off” (quoted in Jeffries 2005:31). He would thus likely agree with Bielharz (2009:140) that socialism today should be viewed, not so much as an alternative economic system to capitalism, but as its “alter ego.”

Anthony Giddens and the Late Modern Age

Given the severe criticisms discussed previously, one might reasonably ask why postmodern cultural theory has had such an impact in some quarters of sociology. One answer is that postmodernists have addressed new cultural conditions that had not, until recently, received adequate attention from modernist theorists. Second, many postmodernists similar to Bauman have backed away from the extreme positions articulated from a sociological vantage point by Baudrillard and from a more philosophical orientation by figures such as Lyotard and Derrida. Some creative thinkers, such as Frederic Jameson, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and Nancy Fraser, have sought to selectively fuse elements of postmodernist theory with various modernist

theories, particularly those emanating from Marxism and feminism. By continuing to employ the term postmodernism, however, they persist in conveying the sense that a radical cultural break has recently occurred or is in the process of occurring. Put another way, they resist the idea that the world we live in “is not *all* about flux,” and that “[w]e remain firmly stuck within modernity” (Bielharz 2009:27).

This idea of a radical break has been criticized by a number of theorists (including Jürgen Habermas), nowhere more cogently than in the work of Anthony Giddens. It is fitting that we end our discussion of major themes in sociology with Giddens for two reasons. First, he is recognized as one of the best—perhaps the best—textual exegete of sociological theory in the world today. Giddens’s (1971, 1979, 1987, 1995b) treatments of the sociological classics and of major contemporary theorists are known for their incisiveness and judiciousness, and they clearly reveal his conviction that sociological theorizing is both polemical (i.e., critical of the perceived shortcomings of the work of others) and forensic insofar as it builds on the work of others (for a general discussion of exegetical dilemmas, see Lybrand 1996). Second, Giddens brings us full circle because, as you may recall, he was one of the theorists mentioned in Chapter 1 who, in the face of considerable criticism, provided a vigorous defense of sociology.

Born in North London in 1938, Giddens did not distinguish himself as a student during his early years in school. Thus, rather than entering the elite Oxbridge world, he pursued undergraduate studies at Hull University. Denied entrance into the English department, he chose philosophy as an alternative major. When too few course offerings in philosophy were available, he took up sociology and psychology. Thus, this preeminent social theorist seems to have stumbled into the discipline. Giddens quickly became fascinated with these social sciences, and this interest had a positive impact on his academic success because he graduated with first honors.

Giddens then attended the prestigious London School of Economics, where he obtained a master’s degree, and subsequently obtained a lectureship at Leicester University. He left Leicester in the late 1960s to teach in Canada at Simon Fraser University, after which he moved to the United States, where he taught at UCLA. His encounter with Southern California during the height of the 1960s’ student revolts and the counterculture was an eye-opening experience. Bryant and Jary (1991) describe the impact of this encounter on how Giddens envisioned sociology as follows:

Old European sociologies of class and authority shed little light on the revolution of everyday life associated with the hippies and with the new social movements including the student and anti-Vietnam movements. He recounts how a

trip to a beach populated with large numbers of people in strange garb brought home to him that European sociology, and the agenda of the European Left, had their limitations. (p. 5)

Giddens returned to England at the end of the tumultuous decade of the 1960s, where he both completed his doctorate and was appointed to a lectureship in sociology at Cambridge University. Despite numerous visiting appointments abroad, including a stint at the University of California at Santa Barbara and, perhaps, a return to the beaches of southern California (he took a sociological interest in the body at approximately this time), he stayed in England, where he served as the director of the London School of Economics until his retirement in 2003.

During this time, he translated theory into praxis by serving as the intellectual guru of Prime Minister Tony Blair, who steered Britain's Labour Party toward the political center, transforming it into what he has dubbed "New Labour." Giddens was rewarded for his contributions to this political project by being named a life peer in the House of Lords.

The principal architect of a theoretical framework for a politics of what he calls "the Third Way" (Giddens 1998), Giddens envisions the Third Way as an alternative both to the neoliberal policies of Margaret Thatcher and to the welfare state created and defended by "Old Labour." He sees the Third Way as a new version of social democracy that, although connected to the Left, is actually located in what he refers to as the "radical center." Although many features of Third Way politics are ambiguous, Giddens is quite clear in two fundamental respects: (1) He is certain that after the collapse of communism, market capitalism is the only viable economic system. (2) Although the state is portrayed as continuing to play a role in combating the inequalities generated by the market, protecting individual rights, and confronting ecological problems, he is especially concerned about the strengthening of civil society. The success of Third Way policies rests mainly with the capacity of a vibrant civil society to emerge and to contain the excesses both of the unbridled market and of the bureaucratic state (Giddens 1998, 2000, 2002).

Structuration Theory

Giddens has written prolifically on all the topics discussed in this book. Of relevance to his understanding of modernity, in *The Class Structure of the Advanced Industrial Societies* (1973), he sought to depict the ways the class configurations of contemporary industrial societies were similar to and differed from the earlier industrial society analyzed by Marx. In this work, he

was critical of postindustrial theorists, such as Bell and Touraine, for postulating a radical discontinuity between industrial and postindustrial societies. Instead, Giddens argued for historical continuity; change had certainly occurred, but he thought it more accurate to speak about an advanced industrial society rather than a postindustrial one. As we shall see, he makes a similar claim in confronting the claims of postmodernists.

Before discussing the specific contours of what Giddens refers to as “high modernity” or the “late modern age,” one needs to link this work to his general attempt to reorient sociological theory. Although Giddens contends that he has been engaged in the development of what he calls “structuration theory” throughout his entire career, his efforts at theory construction are most clearly revealed in two works, *The New Rules of Sociological Method* (1976; the title is an explicit response to Durkheim’s [1938] much earlier *Rules of Sociological Method*) and, especially, *The Constitution of Society* (1984).

The second book is the crowning achievement in Giddens’s efforts at theory construction. Citing an often-quoted passage from Marx’s “The Eighteenth Brumaire” ([1852] 1996), Giddens agrees that people create their own social worlds, although they do so in circumstances not of their own choosing. In his view, the major problem confronting social theory revolves around offering an adequate linkage between actors and social structures. The theory of structuration is an attempt to overcome the dualism that he sees as plaguing other theories—a dualism that gives priority either to actors or to social structures. Although various interpretive sociologies, including symbolic interaction, have tended to accord too much to agency at the expense of structure, the reverse is true in various structuralist theories, including Parsonian and neo-Marxist versions (Giddens 1984; Cohen 1989).

Given the scope of Giddens’s concerns and the range of theoretical resources he brings to bear on the project, it is impossible to provide a brief summary of structuration theory. For our purposes, it is important to note that Giddens’s proposed solution to the actor-structure problem is arrived at by focusing on social practices. He argues for what he calls the “duality of structure,” which means that structures both are produced by human actors and are the means by which such action takes place. Structures are created by humans, but they in turn constrain and enable human action (Giddens 1976, 1984; Craib 1992:33–72; Lemert 1995:146–156).

The significance of this perspective for his substantive contributions to our understanding of modernity is that embedded in his theory is a perspective that encourages what might be seen as a tempered optimism—a view that does not succumb to the pessimistic conclusions about the inability to

change for the better the course of modern life. Actors are not rendered powerless and thus have a role to play—individually and collectively—in directing, shaping, and managing the forces of modernity. Modernity, however, is a “juggernaut” that we are forced to ride: We are not in a position to abandon or transcend it at will (Giddens 1990:151).

Consequences of Modernity

In a trilogy that appeared in the early 1990s, Giddens employed his theory of structuration to explore various facets of modernity, searching for continuities with the recent past as well as those aspects of contemporary social life that suggest we have entered a new phase or stage of modernity, which he refers to as late modernity or high modernity. Taken as a whole, these works constitute an implicit response to Latour’s question posed at the beginning of the chapter. Giddens’s answer is that we are indeed modern and have been so for quite some time. Apparently, we will continue to be modern well into the foreseeable future. Giddens stated, “What other people call postmodern I think of as the radicalizing of modernity” (Giddens and Pierson 1998:116).

In the first and most systematic of these books, *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990), Giddens contends that modernity arose in the West under the twin impact of the modern expansionist nation-state and the system of capitalist industrialism. In its relatively brief history, modernity became a global phenomenon infiltrating non-Western cultures throughout the world.

The modern world is composed of nation-states that are crucial in directing a society’s allocation of resources. The centralization of power in the state gives it military might as well as far-ranging administrative control over its citizenry. Nation-states make a major contribution in creating the modern information society because this institution paves the way for new and more pervasive modes of surveillance and control. Moreover, the nation-state is intimately linked to a capitalist industrial economy. Capitalism refers to a highly competitive system of production with labor markets operating on a global scale, whereas for Giddens, industrialism basically refers to the use of machine technology to control and transform nature and to develop a “created environment.” In combination, they profoundly transformed social relations and humanity’s relationship to the natural world.

Modernity results in a process of what Giddens (1990:19) calls “distan- ciation,” which means that social relations are no longer tied to particular locales. Relationships with those who are not physically present become

increasingly more characteristic of the modern world. An appreciation of this phenomenon is evident in AT&T's old advertising jingle, "Reach out and touch someone." It is also the topic of considerable speculation in discussions about virtual relationships established in cyberspace.

Modernity also entails a related process known as "disembedding" (Giddens 1990:21–27). This involves "the 'lifting out' of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space" (p. 21). Like Simmel, Giddens sees one major type of disembedding in the expansion of a money economy. In some respects, like Durkheim, he sees a second type of disembedding in the increasing reliance on professional and technical experts. In both types, it is essential for people to operate with sufficient levels of trust, which Giddens (1991b) defines as "the vesting of confidence in persons or in abstract systems, made on the basis of a 'leap into faith' which brackets ignorance or lack of information" (p. 244). How is trust established and maintained? What are the threats to trust? Giddens treats these as crucial and unresolved questions in his discussions of late modern society as a risk society.

Risk in Late Modernity

Giddens (1990:55–63) identifies four risks of modernity embedded in this politicoeconomic institutional framework (Table 5.1). The first is the expanded ability of those with power to engage in surveillance in the interest of controlling information and monitoring and controlling people. Because the surveillance capabilities of the state and of capitalist enterprises have expanded dramatically in recent years, this ability creates the increased risk of the growth of totalitarian power.

The second risk is associated with the rapid escalation in military power brought about by the "industrialization of war," a phenomenon that, beginning with World War I, signaled the end of "limited wars" and the dawn of

Table 5.1 Giddens on the Risks and Promise of Late Modernity

Risks	Promise
Growth of totalitarian power	Multilayered democratic participation
Nuclear war or large-scale warfare	Transcendence of warfare
Collapse of economic growth	Postscarcity economy mechanisms
Ecological disaster	System of planetary care

the era of “total” wars. The development of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons, has created heretofore unimaginable threats to human survival and has led to far more war-related deaths in the 20th century than in any other century (e.g., the number of war-related deaths in the 20th century was at least 15 times more than that in the 19th century) (Giddens 1991a:429–431).

The third risk relates to the potential collapse of economic growth systems. This risk is connected to the fourth, which involves the potential for ecological decay or disaster. Giddens’s politics are on the political Left, and thus it is not surprising that he contends that capitalism must be regulated to remedy its “erratic qualities” or, as Marxists would say, its crisis tendencies. He also sees modern capitalism as yielding gross inequalities at the national and global levels. Added to these problems, and going beyond Marxism, Giddens argues that capitalism’s need to constantly expand productive capacity comes up against ecological limits, and thus the pursuit of capitalist accumulation is a major cause of environmental degradation (Giddens 1990:163–170; Beck 1992, 2009).

In summary, separately and in combination, these risk factors define the dark side of the late modern condition, and the seriousness of these threats might seem to justify a pessimism not unlike that expressed by many postmodernists. Indeed, Giddens (1990) concludes *The Consequences of Modernity* with the following bleak prognosis:

On the other side of modernity, as virtually no one on earth can any longer fail to be conscious, there could be nothing but a “republic of insects and grass,” or a cluster of damaged and traumatized human social communities. . . . Apocalypse has become trite, so familiar is it as a counterfactual of day-to-day life; yet like all parameters of risk, it can become real. (p. 173)

Giddens (1990:154–163), however, does not succumb to pessimism because he sees these risks as potential and not as inevitable. Preventing this dreadful scenario from unfolding and ensuring that solutions to the four types of risk can be found are distinctly possible. In particular, Giddens sees considerable promise in various social movements that operate with an orientation that he refers to as “utopian realism.” The labor movement (the movement with its origins in the earliest stages of industrial society) seeks to address the risk tendencies of capitalism, whereas democratic movements challenge authoritarianism, peace movements challenge militarization, and ecological movements seek to remedy threats to the global environment. Although the success of these movements is not guaranteed, neither is their failure. What is essential for the viability of these movements is a worldview

that considers plausible utopian realism. To that end, Giddens has become increasingly focused on explicating pragmatic political and policy choices, whether in examining the ways to enact what he sees as necessary reforms to Europe's social welfare model (Giddens 2007) or finding solutions from a center-left position to the ecological threat posed by climate change (Giddens 2009).

Modernity as Lived Experience

In the two books that followed *Consequences* (1990)—*Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991b) and *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992)—Giddens turned to more Simmelian concerns, that is, to how people experience the modern condition. He attempts to indicate the growing connection between global developments and changes that are occurring in the shaping of self-identities and in establishing interpersonal relationships. Although attuned to the fact that these changes will likely be experienced differently based on such factors as gender identity and sexual orientation, Giddens does not explore in-depth the potential differences or their implications the way that feminists such as Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Judith Butler have done.

For Giddens, the self becomes a project to be created rather than something decisively determined by tradition or habit. This project brings with it the possibility of considerable doubt and the threat of a sense of meaninglessness. It also, however, grants to individuals the possibility of engaging in life planning—in adopting a variety of lifestyle options. Whereas some critics of self-help manuals, 12-step programs, and so on see in this lifestyle exploration a form of contemporary narcissism, Giddens has a more positive assessment. Indeed, he depicts this trend in terms of the emergence of “life politics,” which is concerned with the freedom of individuals to make choices and to create answers to the existential question of how a person should live his or her life. In other words, life politics involves the promotion of individual self-actualization (Giddens 1991b:209–231).

Life politics has far-ranging implications for interpersonal relationships, especially intimate ones. The democratization of intimate relations and the quest for emotional self-fulfillment have transformed intimacy, creating the possibility in late modernity of “pure relationships,” which are relations determined and defined solely on their own internal terms and not in terms of any external factors. Giddens (1992) claims that “the transformation of intimacy might be a subversive influence upon modern institutions as a whole” (p. 3). Given the fact that his thought remains a work in progress, much remains unclear about what this transformation might entail outside the realm of intimate relations. It is certain, however, that

the modern age is one characterized by reflexivity, which means that it is an age in which our acts and beliefs are constantly subjected to examination and reflection.

Summary

Anthony Giddens is part of a community of sociological discourse—involving sociologists past and present—that has played and will continue to play a singularly important role in the ongoing act of examining and reflecting on the human condition in the contemporary world. Although all the classical theorists discussed in this book have much to say about modernity, this chapter reveals the unique insights of Georg Simmel—insights that have shaped our understanding of what it means to be modern and what it means to be postmodern. Indeed, the uneven reception of Simmel's work meant that both theorists of modernity and those of postmodernity have benefited from his thinking. His former student, Robert Park, extrapolated his ideas and incorporated them in his own work on both the city and race relations in the modern age. Postmodernists such as Baudrillard build on his legacy in their focus on leisure and consumption. Bauman and Simmel share a conviction concerning the centrality of ambivalence to the contemporary human condition. Finally, theorists of modernity such as Giddens have learned much from Simmel's attention to the lived experience of modernity.

