

## **Module-20**

# **POST-MODERN SOCIOLOGY**



**Developed by:**

**Dr. Subrata Chatterjee**  
**Associate Professor of Sociology**  
**Khejuri College**  
**P.O- Baratala, Purba Medinipur**  
**West Bengal, India**

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## INTRODUCTION

Postmodern society is diverse and pluralistic. Postmodern society's images are perceived through films, videos, TV programmes and websites and circulated around the world. We come into contact with many ideas and values, having little connection with the history of the areas in which we live, or with our own personal histories. One important theorist of postmodernity is the French author Jean Baudrillard, who was strongly influenced by Marxism in his early days, believes that the electronic media have destroyed our relationship to the past and created a chaotic, empty world. He argues that the spread of electronic communication and the mass media has reversed the Marxist theorem that economic forces shape society. Instead, signs and images influence social life.

In a media-dominated age, Baudrillard says, meaning is created by the flow of images, as in TV programmes. Much of our world has become a sort of make-believe universe in which we are responding to media images rather than to real persons or places. Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman offers a two ways of thinking about postmodern ideas. On the one hand, we could argue that the social world has rapidly moved in a post-modern direction. The enormous growth and spread of the mass media, new information technologies, more fluid movement of people across the world and the development of multicultural societies. All of these mean that we no longer live in a modern world, but in a postmodern one. Modernity is dead and we are entering a period of postmodernity. The second view is that the postmodern changes cannot be analyzed using old sociological theories and concepts and we need to devise new ones. In short, we need a postmodern sociology for a postmodern world.

Bauman accepts that the modern project that originated in the European Enlightenment to rationally shape society no longer makes sense, at least not in the way thought possible by Comte, Marx or other classical theorists. However, since the turn of the century he has moved away from the term 'postmodern' which he says has become corrupted through too diverse usage and now describes the world as one of 'Liquid Modernity', reflecting the fact that it is in constant flux and uncertainty in spite of all attempts to impose a modern order and stability onto it.

Jiirgen Habermas a staunch critic of postmodern theory argued that now is not the time to give up on the 'project' of modernity. He sees modernity as 'an incomplete project' and instead of resigning it to the dustbin of history, we should be extending it: pushing for more democracy, freedom and rational policies. The postmodern analyses are now losing ground to the theory of

globalization, which has become the dominant theoretical framework for understanding the direction of social change in the twenty-first century.

Anthony Giddens in his writings developed a theoretical perspective on the changes happening in the present day world. According to Giddens we live today in what is called a runaway world, a world marked by new risks and uncertainties of the sort. But we should place the notion of trust, which is the confidence in individuals and institutions alongside that of risk. In a world of rapid transformation, traditional forms of trust tend to become dissolved. Living in a more globalized society, however, our lives are influenced by people we never see or meet, who may be living on the far side of the world from us. Trust and risk are closely bound up with one another. We need to have confidence if we are to confront the risks that surround us, and react to them in an effective way.

German sociologist, Ulrich Beck, also rejects postmodernism. According to Beck rather than living in a world 'beyond the modern', we are moving into a phase of 'the second modernity'. The second modernity refers to the fact that modern institutions are becoming global, while everyday life is breaking free from the hold of tradition and custom. The old industrial society is disappearing and getting replaced by a 'risk society'. What the postmodernists see as chaos, or lack of pattern, Beck sees as risk or uncertainty. The management of risk is the prime feature of the global order. The advance of science and technology creates new risk situations that are very different from those of previous ages. Science and technology provide many benefits for us. Yet they create risks that are hard to measure. Many decisions taken at the level of everyday life also become infused with risk.

## **Postmodern Sociology – Sexual Egalitarianism**

Many followers of Postmodern sociology consider marriage the greatest of evils. Rorty is particularly harsh on Christian parents who teach their children about God, referring to them as “frightening, vicious, and dangerous.” Other Postmodernists show their contempt for Christian concepts of love, sex, and marriage, preferring various forms of “free love” (hooking up, shacking up, living together, cohabitation, etc.). Postmodernist psychiatrist Adam Phillips precludes the possibility of contractual marriage and describes any relationship in harsh terms: “The only sane foregone conclusion about any relationship is that it is an experiment; and that exactly what it is an experiment in will never be clear to the participants. For the sane, so-called relationships could never be subject to contract.”

Acknowledging the traditional heterosexual family as the norm in Western society, Postmodernists decry that this “heterosexist norm” enables society “to marginalize some sexual practices as ‘against nature,’ and thereby [attempt] to prove the naturalness of the heterosexual

monogamy and family values upon which mainstream society bases itself.” Postmodernists encourage open conversation about the way we experience sexual relationships. Foucault maintains that talking about sex helps to create sexual diversity. He says, “The putting into discourse of sex, far from undergoing a process of restriction, on the contrary has been subjected to a mechanism of increasing incitement...the techniques of power exercised over sex have not obeyed a principle of rigorous selection, but rather one of dissemination and implantation of polymorphous sexualities.”

Talking about sex reveals “an ever expanding encyclopedia of preferences, gratifications and perversions. It creates a realm of perversion by discovering, commenting on and exploring it. It brings it into being as an object of study and in doing so serves to categorize and objectify those who occupy what has been made into the secret underworld of ‘deviance.’” Foucault says, “We must...ask why we burden ourselves today with so much guilt for having once made sex a sin.” Foucault was “a disciple of the Marquis de Sade,” and like him embraced all sexual activity as permissible, including man/ boy relationships (pederasty). Few boundaries exist in a socially constructed reality.

What used to be considered perverted, abnormal, or deviant sexual behavior is now viewed as personal preference, and no moral pronouncements are attached to the actions. The line between heterosexual and homosexual practices is blurred. Walter Truett Anderson says, “I have been putting words like ‘abnormal’ and ‘deviant’ in quotes because those categorizations are under fire now, the boundary between normal and abnormal as questionable now as are all the other boundaries that once defined social reality.” We use the term “sexual egalitarianism” to characterize the Postmodern view of sociology that allows each person to define his or her sexuality and proposes that all sexual preferences are equally valid.

## **Postmodern Sociology – Politically Correct Education**

When it comes to Postmodern sociology, Anderson explains the goals and methods Postmodernists adopt in regard to education: “[Postmodernism] rejects the notion that the purpose of education is primarily to train a child’s cognitive capacity for reason in order to produce an adult capable of functioning independently in the world. That view of education is replaced with the view that education is to take an essentially indeterminate being and give it a social identity. Education’s method of molding is linguistic, and so the language to be used is that which will create a human being sensitive to its racial, sexual, and class identity.”

Anderson outlines major shifts in focus in the Postmodern classroom in contrast to the modern classroom: “Education should emphasize works not in the canon, it should focus on the achievements of non-whites, females and the poor; it should highlight the historical crimes of whites, males, and the rich; and it should teach children that science’s method has no better claim to yielding truth than any other method and, accordingly, that students should be equally

receptive to alternative ways of knowing.” Postmodern education teaches that all truth is relative, all cultures are equally deserving of respect (although Western culture comes under severe criticism), and all values are subjective (although racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia are universally evil).

Course offerings at colleges and universities in the Postmodern age are also nontraditional, focusing on themes of race, sex, and gender. For example, Stanford University’s Feminist Studies Department offers “Lesbian Communities and Identities.” The catalog describes the course as “Scholarship and research on lesbian experience. Issues of homophobia, lesbian intimacy, and sexuality. Femme and butch roles, lesbian separatism, and diversity of lesbian communities and identities.” Stanford’s History Department offers a course entitled “Homosexuals, Heretics, Witches, and Werewolves: Deviants of Medieval Society.” The catalog describes the course as answering the following question: “Why were medieval heretics accused of deviant sexual practices?” Every Ivy League school except Princeton offers more courses in Women’s Studies than in Economics. Columbia’s Women’s Studies Department offers “The Invisible Woman in Literature: The Lesbian Literary Tradition,” “Introduction to Gay and Lesbian Studies,” and “Gendered Controversies: Women’s Bodies and Global Contestations.”

Dartmouth’s Women’s Studies Department offers “Shakespeare and Gender,” described in the course catalog as answering the questions, “Is language gender-inflected? How is power exerted and controlled in sexual relationships?” Dartmouth’s English Department offers a course called “Queer Theory, Queer Texts.” Brown University offers these departments and courses: “Afro-American Studies—‘Black Lavender: Study of Black Gay/Lesbian Plays;’ Education—‘The Psychology of Race, Class, and Gender;’ English—‘Unnatural Acts: Introduction to Lesbian/Gay Literature.’”

Not only has the subject matter of courses and departments shifted dramatically away from traditional fare, Christianity is often viewed with contempt and ridicule. Richard Rorty, Professor of Comparative Literature at Stanford, writes, “When we American college teachers encounter religious fundamentalists...we do our best to convince these students of the benefits of secularization...I think these students are lucky to find themselves under...people like me, and to have escaped the grip of their frightening, vicious, dangerous parents.” Not all new courses are met with enthusiasm. Richard Zeller, a sociology professor at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, attempted to introduce a new course that would examine the effects of political correctness in response to students’ claims that they felt pressured to assume politically correct views in order to pass courses. BGSU’s Director of Women’s Studies, Kathleen Dixon, protested vehemently, saying, “We forbid any course that says we restrict free speech.” The course was voted down, and Zeller resigned in protest after twenty-five years of teaching at Bowling Green.

## **Power/Knowledge/Subjectivity: Foucault's Postmodern Analytics**

We had to wait until the nineteenth century before we began to understand the nature of exploitation, and to this day, we have yet to fully comprehend the nature of power. Beginning in the early 1970s, Foucault attempts to rethink the nature of modern power in a non-totalizing, non-representational, and anti-humanist scheme. He rejects all modern theories that see power to be anchored in macrostructures or ruling classes and to be repressive in nature. He develops new postmodern perspectives that interpret power as dispersed, indeterminate, heteromorphous, subjectless and productive, constituting individuals' bodies and identities. He claims that the two dominant models for theorizing modern power, the juridical and economic models, are flawed by outmoded and erroneous assumptions. The economic model, as espoused by Marxists, is rejected as a reductionistic subordination of power to class domination and economic imperatives. The juridical model, his primary target, analyzes power in terms of law, legal and moral right, and political sovereignty. While the bourgeois revolution decapitated the king in the sociopolitical realm, Foucault argues that many concepts and assumptions of the sovereign-juridical model continue to inform modern thought (for example, in liberal theory and repression theories of power in general). He therefore attempts 'to cut off the head of the king' in the realm of theory with a genealogical guillotine.

Foucault marks a rupture in history that inaugurates a radically different mode of power than theorized on the juridical model, a power that is productive, not repressive, in nature, one which is 'bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them'. As evident from the dramatic historical shifts Foucault outlines in *Discipline and Punish*, from the gruesome torture of Damians to the moral reform of prisoners, schoolchildren, and others, this power operates not through physical force or representation by law, but through the hegemony of norms, political technologies, and the shaping of the body and soul.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault terms this new mode of power 'bio-power'. Its first modality, as we have already discussed, is a disciplinary power that involves 'an anatomopolitics of the human body'. Most generally, Foucault defines disciplines as 'techniques for assuring the ordering of human multiplicities'. Initially developed in monasteries and in late-seventeenth-century plague towns that required methods of spatial separation and population surveillance, disciplinary techniques soon extended throughout society, thereby forming a gigantic 'carceral archipelago'.

The second modality of bio-power, emerging subsequent to disciplinary power, focuses on the 'species body', the social population in general. 'Governments perceived that they were not dealing simply with subjects, or even with a "people", but with a "population", with its specific phenomena and its peculiar variables: birth and death rates, life expectancy, fertility, state of health, frequency of illnesses, patterns of diet and habitation'. The ensuing supervision of the

population represents 'the entry of life into history', into a densely constituted field of knowledge, power, and techniques. Hence, in the eighteenth century, sexuality became an object of discursive administration and regulation. The 'deployment of sexuality' produced perversions and sexual categorizations of various sorts in accordance with normalizing strategies of power.

Against modern theories that see knowledge as neutral and objective (positivism) or emancipatory (Marxism), Foucault emphasizes that knowledge is indissociable from regimes of power. His concept of 'power/knowledge' is symptomatic of the postmodern suspicion of reason and the emancipatory schemes advanced in its name. The circular relationship between power and knowledge is established in Foucault's genealogical critiques of the human sciences. Having emerged within the context of relations of power, through practices and technologies of exclusion, confinement, surveillance, and objectification, disciplines such as psychiatry, sociology, and criminology in turn contributed to the development, refinement, and proliferation of new techniques of power. Institutions such as the asylum, hospital, or prison functioned as laboratories for observation of individuals, experimentation with correctional techniques, and acquisition of knowledge for social control.

The modern individual became both an object and subject of knowledge, not 'repressed', but positively shaped and formed within the matrices of 'scientifico-disciplinary mechanisms', a moral/legal/psychological/medical/sexual being 'carefully fabricated ... according to a whole technique of force and bodies'. As Foucault understands it, the term 'subject' has a double meaning: one is both 'subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to. . [their] own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge'. Hence, as Dews (1987) has noted, Foucault rejects the Enlightenment model which links consciousness, self-reflection, and freedom, and instead follows Nietzsche's claim in *The Genealogy of Morals* that self-knowledge, particularly in the form of moral consciousness, is a strategy and effect of power whereby one internalizes social control.

Against modern theories that posit a pre given, unified subject or an unchanging human essence that precedes all social operations, Foucault calls for the destruction of the subject and sees this as a key political tactic. 'One has to dispense with the constituent subject, and to get rid of the subject itself, that's to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework'. The notion of a constituent subject is a humanist mystification that occludes a critical examination of the various institutional sites where subjects are produced within power relations. Taking his cue from Nietzsche, Foucault's task is to awaken thought from its humanist slumbers and to destroy 'all concrete forms of the anthropological prejudice', a task which would allow us 'to renew contact ... with the project of a general critique of reason'. To accomplish this, the subject must be 'stripped of its creative role and analyzed as a complex and variable function of discourse'. Hence, Foucault rejects the active subject and welcomes the emerging postmodern era as a positive event where the denuding of agency occurs and new forms of thought can emerge.

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