

**The Chinese University of Hong Kong**

**Department of Sociology**

**Webcast Lectures**

**香港中文大學社會學系**

**網上教室**

**Undergraduate Course**

**SOC 2002 Contemporary Theory**

**by**

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## Lecture 4: Idealism and Postmodernism

Shared assumptions of idealism and postmodernism (as opposed to empiricism, interpretivism and realism):

- 1) skepticism to the existence of reality outside our mind;
- 2) the world is always reconstructed in our mind, such that we never approach it independently of our ideas of it;
- 3) our reconstruction of the world is its most important aspect, which constitutes the proper focus of sociological analysis;
- 4) skepticism to the value of mainstream theory, to the extent that social theory is considered as unnecessary and even fantastic to the understanding of the world.

### A) Idealism: Peter Winch

#### i. General perspective:

- As social members sharing a given language, we may understand others simply by talking to them.
- We may conduct ethnography and give personal interpretations of the meaning of others' words and actions. There is no need to check these interpretations against observations of external world.

#### ii. Philosophical background: Wittgenstein's second theory of language

- Wittgenstein's first theory of language: words are fundamentally pictures of things and actions of the external world.
- Wittgenstein's second theory of language: the meaning of words comes from the way we use them; it is defined by our purpose and intention rather than the things and activities of external world they are supposed to represent.

#### iii. Ontological assumption:

- External world is always the product of our shared understanding of it through language.
- To speak a language we must follow a set of social rules defining its proper usage. To follow these rules correctly we must bear certain tacit knowledge of the way of life in a given society.
- All those who can speak a particular language must be able to understand the society in which they live. Life is not lived through language; it is in language.

#### v. Epistemological assumption:

- To understand society we must understand its language; conversely to understand a language we must understand the society it is in use.
- No social theory is necessary; what we need to do is to acquire the language of a society by immersing ourselves in the social life of the people we purport to study.

#### vi. Limitation:

- It would be almost impossible for an outsider to understand a society.
- The insiders are granted privileged access to such understanding, an assumption that is questionable and may lead to a disturbing nationalist implication.

## B) Postmodernism

### i. Modernism as the target of attack of postmodernism:

For postmodernism, modernism is the meta-theory underlying all meta-theories, such that its critique amounts to a critique of all variants of epistemology and ontology of mainstream social theory.

### ii. Some examples of modernist paintings (slide show):

Classical painting (John Constable): Accurate representation of objects.

Impressionism (Monet and Cezanne): Expression of subjective perspectives and feelings towards objects.

Cubism (Picasso): Influenced by the saccadic movements; representation of objects as glances and movements seen from various positions.

Surrealism (Dali): utilized psychoanalysis for the expression of strong emotion.

Common characteristics of modernist painting: the use of scientific discoveries for the expression of subjective perception and feeling.

In general, modernism is a combination of individualism, truth-seeking through science, and belief in progress.

### iii. The rise of postmodernism:

The pop art movement in the early 1960s marked the beginning of postmodernism, which was eventually spread from the aesthetic to academic circle in the 1970s.

Slide show:

Kitha's postmodernist painting: no unity of style, but rather an eclectic mixture of divergent styles and multiple perspectives.

Modernist architecture: simple and functional.

Postmodernist architecture: mixture of architectural styles, ancient and modern.

### iv. Lyotard: *The Postmodern Condition* (1979)

Postmodernism rejects two modernist assumptions:

-- Myth of truth: we no longer believe that we can know the truth. Socially and culturally relative paradigms stand in the way between us and the world.

-- Myth of progress: science can be abused and led to regress rather than progress, as in Holocaust and Gulag. Scientific progress is neither inevitable nor necessarily good.

Lyotard's definition of postmodernism: incredulity towards meta-narratives.

-- There is no guarantee to truth and progress, such that all meta-theories are essentially mythical, fantastic and doubtful.

-- Anti-foundationalism: there is no foundation upon which we can construct objective truth and ground ethical judgment.

Summary of the differences between modernism and postmodernism: (adopted from Frederic Jameson):

<b>Modernism</b>	<b>Postmodernism</b>
Depth	Surface
Purity	Decoration
Unity	Fragmentation
Feeling	Irony
Future Utopia	Instant Happiness

- In the field of sociology, the above differences imply a shift of concern from *society and social structure* to *identity and body*.
- The analytical focus of sociology is no longer the interrelationship among the parts of an underlying, overall social structure, but rather the differences among people in bodily appearances and feelings.
- As such postmodernism is not merely a critique of the existing state of sociology, but also contributes to a renewed research agenda.