

*The sociogenesis of postmodernism*

'A S P E C T R E is haunting Europe—the spectre of postmodernism'. Thus wrote the German literary scholar Hans Robert Jauss in 1983 (1).

This was a time indeed when postmodernism was becoming fashionable, evoking curiosity, excitement, confusion and irritation. But postmodernism turned out to be more than just a fleeting fashion. Though it no longer evokes the excitement and curiosity of the new, it is still with us—in conversations and classrooms, in books and scholarly journals, in tourist guides and popular magazines. In the last two decades of the past century, the spectre of postmodernism spread its wings over almost every subject imaginable. Searching through library catalogues I encountered, in the titles of recent books and articles, such unexpected word combinations as postmodern finance, postmodern housing policy, postmodern algebra, the postmodern library, the postmodern brain and the postmodern Bible.

Postmodernism is not over, but it has existed long enough to be viewed with a certain detachment as a historical phenomenon: a cultural movement which took off in the 1960s, broadened its scope and impact in the 1970s, became popular and fashionable in the 1980s and was routinized and academized in the 1990s. In this article I will attempt to give a compact and comprehensive explanation of this cultural complex by taking the position of the sociological outsider. This means that I will maintain distance from the various explanations which are part of the ongoing debates on postmodernism and serve the polemical function of either legitimating or attacking the (or a) postmodern position. It also means that I do not stick to any particular definition of what postmodernism essentially means or of what postmodernity really is (2).

Depicting postmodernism as a spectre is not a bad characterization, since it does not cover a coherent theory or ideology, a specific set of social institutions, a bounded collectivity or any other clear-cut part of

(1) Quoted by Ruiter 1991: 27. The sentence refers of course to the opening phrase of *The Communist Manifesto*.

(2) Both defenders and critics of postmod-

ernism tend to define it in specific ways, bending it to their own viewpoints. One example: Lemert 1997.

reality. Like all other 'isms', but even more than many other ones, postmodernism defies all simple definitions. The concept has been used to refer to certain styles in art, architecture and design, to forms of literary fiction, theater, dance, music, to philosophical ideas and scholarly views, to organizational structures (or non-structures) and as an all-encompassing label for the present age. All these definitions are open to dispute and have been disputed. One social fact remains clear however: people have used the words postmodern, postmodernism and postmodernity to express certain views. Postmodernism will be conceived here (in a postmodern vein) as a *discourse* in which the term 'postmodern' and its derivatives—postmodernism, postmodernist, postmodernity—are used for the classification, interpretation and evaluation of human activities, achievements and artefacts.

By thus taking the position of the detached observer working in the sociology of knowledge tradition I hope to give fresh insights into the sociogenesis of postmodernism (3). Before entering systematically into the question of explanation of this cultural complex, I will give a short descriptive overview of its development with the help of quantitative data.

### *The spread of postmodernism*

#### *Expansion and differentiation: some quantitative data*

Let's start simply. If we define postmodernism as a discourse in which the term 'postmodern' and its derivatives are used and add that it is an *intellectual* discourse in which written texts are central, we have a criterion by which postmodernism's development can be measured: the number of texts published each year in which these words have a prominent place. A rough and ready indication of this development are the numbers of publications each year which have one or more of these terms in the title. Table 1 presents these numbers (4).

(3) The term 'sociogenesis' is derived from Elias 2000.

(4) The book titles are from the catalogue of the Library of Congress in Washington DC. This is of course a selection out of a wider possible set, if only because the large majority of the books (not all) is in English. The selection includes the titles with the words

'postmodernist', 'postmodern', 'postmodernist' and 'postmodernism'. Different editions of the same book, including translations, have been counted as one. The numbers of articles are derived from the PICA system used by Dutch university libraries which covers a very large set of scientific and scholarly as well as more popular, journals in

TABLE I  
*Number of books and articles with postmodern, postmodernism  
 and/or postmodernity in their title*

| Period             | <1970 | 1970-<br>1974 | 1975-<br>1979 | 1980-<br>1984 | 1985-<br>1989 | 1990-<br>1994 | 1995-<br>1999 | 2000 | Total  |
|--------------------|-------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|------|--------|
| Number of books    | 3     | 1             | 8             | 36            | 140           | 367           | 564           | 110  | 1229   |
| Books per year     | 0     | 0.2           | 1.6           | 7.2           | 28.0          | 73.4          | 112.8         | 110  | 39.5*  |
| Number of articles | 13    | 7             | 21            | 72            | 286           | 1037          | 2251          | 342  | 4032   |
| Articles per year  | 0     | 1.4           | 4.2           | 14.4          | 57.2          | 207.4         | 451.2         | 342  | 129.7* |

\*yearly average 1970-2000.

As we can see in this table, the flow of publications with postmodern/postmodernism/postmodernity in their title increased from a tiny stream in the 1970s to a huge flood in the 1990s. It expanded from a total counted number of 37 publications in the 1970s to 534 in the 1980s and 4219 in the 1990s. The production was by far the highest in the second half of the last decade, with a calculated average of 112.8 books and 451.2 articles a year. This steep growth curve reached its culmination point in 1997, for which 136 books and 502 articles were counted. After that year a slight decrease set in, but in 2000 the number of publications with postmodern/postmodernism/postmodernity in their title was still much higher than in the years before 1994.

These data, in sum, give the picture of a strong and continuous expansion of the postmodernist discourse until only a few years ago. However, the number of publications does not necessarily correspond to the degree to which postmodernism evokes public attention and discussion. When postmodernism became fashionable around 1980, the number of serious postmodernist publications was still quite small. It was only in the 1990s, after the first wave of enthusiasm and curiosity for the new movement had subsided, that the production of postmod-

English (the majority), Dutch, French and German. Though both data files are not exhaustive and selective in different ways, the sets of numbers derived from them can be viewed as reasonably valid approximations of trends in postmodernist writing. Of course, many postmodernist publications do not have a

title with the term postmodern, postmodernism, or postmodernity and not all publications which do have such a title can be classified as 'postmodernist'—they may be very critical of postmodernism (such as Gellner 1992, or Eagleton 1996) or cultivate an attitude of detachment (such as this article).

ernist writings started to take on huge proportions. This apparent discrepancy can be connected to the growing academization of postmodernism, its institutionalization in academic fields where specialists regularly, as part of their work, produce texts which are mainly destined for and read by other specialists.

What are all those publications about and how did the topics change over time? A quantitative answer to this question can be given by classifying postmodernist publications on the basis of the topics they deal with. Table 2 gives the numbers of book publications with postmodern, postmodernism or postmodernity in their title for different subject-fields and time periods (5).

Needless to say that the data in this table only give a rough idea of the distribution of postmodernist topics in different years (6). Yet the numbers clearly show 1) an expansion of the postmodernist discourse after 1980 in all the subject-fields distinguished; 2) a relatively strong focus on literature, arts/architecture, religion/theology and philosophy/ethics in all the years taken together; and 3) a shift in focus from culture in the narrow sense to philosophy, theology and the social sciences. The proportion of books on the arts, architecture or literary works declined from almost two-thirds (64%) of the total before 1980 and almost half (46%) in the 1980s to 28% in the first half of the 1990s and 19% in 1995-2000. This relative decline was particularly strong in the category 'arts and architecture', though even in this area there was no decrease in absolute numbers. Although the proportion of books on literary works declined as well, this subject-field continued to occupy an important place in the postmodernist discourse; it is, as we can see, the largest category for all periods taken together. A remarkable recent increase of postmodernist production took place in the field of religion and theology, which was responsible for the highest number during the years 1995-2000. Postmodernism in the social sciences expanded strongly in the first half of the 1990s, but experienced a relative decline from 1995 to 2000. Among the applied fields, the most striking increase in recent years occurred in education and pedagogy. In the category of 'other applied fields', which include organization and management studies, law, economics and social work, the number of books with

(5) The data are from the catalogue of the Library of Congress (see note 3). A first ordering of subject-fields was made on the basis of my knowledge of postmodernist writings; then the second step was to adapt some categories to the data. The books were classified mainly on the basis of their titles and subtitles; sometimes additional information was available.

Books whose titles gave insufficient or unclear information (and for which no other information about their content was readily available) were assigned to the category 'general and miscellaneous'. The total numbers in the last row of Table 2 correspond with those in Table 1 for book publications.

(6) See note 3.

TABLE 2

*Subject-fields of books with postmodern, postmodernism or postmodernity in their title; absolute numbers and percentages*

| Subject-field/years                       | <1980      | 1980-1989   | 1990-1994   | 1995-2000   | Total        |
|---|------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
| Arts and architecture                     | 5<br>41.7% | 44<br>25.0% | 41<br>11.1% | 50<br>7.4%  | 140<br>11.4% |
| Literature                                | 2<br>16.7% | 37<br>21.0% | 62<br>16.9% | 80<br>11.9% | 181<br>14.7% |
| Culture: general, popular                 | 2<br>16.7% | 9<br>5.4%   | 16<br>4.4%  | 47<br>7.0%  | 74<br>6.0%   |
| Language, writing, semiotics              | 0          | 1<br>0.6%   | 7<br>1.9%   | 19<br>2.8%  | 27<br>2.2%   |
| History                                   | 0          | 0           | 8<br>2.2%   | 14<br>2.1%  | 22<br>1.8%   |
| Philosophy, ethics                        | 0          | 13<br>7.4%  | 31<br>8.4%  | 62<br>9.2%  | 106<br>8.6%  |
| Religion, theology                        | 0          | 15<br>8.5%  | 21<br>5.7%  | 99<br>14.7% | 135<br>11.0% |
| Social science, sociology                 | 0          | 6<br>3.4%   | 32<br>8.7%  | 39<br>5.8%  | 77<br>6.3%   |
| Anthropology, development studies         | 0          | 1<br>0.6%   | 6<br>1.6%   | 15<br>2.2%  | 22<br>1.8%   |
| Ethnic and racial studies                 | 0          | 1<br>0.6%   | 2<br>0.5%   | 14<br>2.1%  | 17<br>1.4%   |
| Geography, urban studies                  | 0          | 1<br>0.6%   | 2<br>0.5%   | 10<br>1.5%  | 13<br>1.1%   |
| Feminism, gender studies                  | 0          | 2<br>1.1%   | 20<br>5.4%  | 26<br>3.9%  | 48<br>3.9%   |
| Psychology, psychotherapy                 | 0          | 2<br>1.1%   | 7<br>1.9%   | 15<br>2.2%  | 24<br>2.0%   |
| Politics, public administration           | 0          | 12<br>6.8%  | 22<br>6.0%  | 38<br>5.6%  | 72<br>5.9%   |
| Education, pedagogy                       | 0          | 3<br>1.2%   | 12<br>3.3%  | 38<br>5.6%  | 53<br>4.3%   |
| Other applied fields                      | 0          | 1<br>0.6%   | 14<br>3.8%  | 27<br>4.0%  | 42<br>3.4%   |
| Natural sciences, mathematics, technology | 0          | 2<br>1.1%   | 3<br>0.8%   | 10<br>1.5%  | 15<br>1.2%   |
| General and miscellaneous                 | 3<br>25.0% | 26<br>14.8% | 61<br>16.6% | 71<br>10.5% | 161<br>13.1% |
| Total                                     | 12<br>100% | 176<br>100% | 367<br>100% | 674<br>100% | 1229<br>100% |

postmodern/postmodernism/postmodernity in their title also increased substantially, but the proportional growth during the 1990s was not significant.

As these data demonstrate, the expansion of the postmodernist discourse went together with its extension from a focus on (though not a strict limitation to) high-culture to a variety of other topics and disciplinary fields, ranging from theology to public administration, from mass media to nursing and from semiotics to urban studies. Even the natural sciences and technology did not remain untouched by postmodern ideas (7). Postmodernism, although never a well-defined system of ideas, differentiated with its expansion and extension.

### *Shifts in meanings*

It is neither possible nor necessary to present in this article a complete overview of the various meanings and uses of postmodernism and their changes over time. Only some main contours of the relevant history will be sketched here (8).

In the course of the 20th century, some authors introduced the term postmodern(ism) independently from one another and applied it to very different fields: religion, poetry, architecture, or, more comprehensively, general belief systems. Thus, Arnold Toynbee in volume 9 of *A Study of History* (1954) described the emergence and spread of irrationalism in the West since about 1870 as the transition from the Modern to the 'post-Modern Age'. C. Wright Mills gave a different meaning to the term when he noted in *The Sociological Imagination* (1959: 184) that the optimistic progressivism expressed in the modern ideologies of liberalism and socialism was giving way to the cold, bureaucratic rationalism of 'the post-modern period'.

The term was picked up by a group of American literary critics in the 1960s who observed the end of Modernism. Postmodernism was used by them to connect contemporary trends in literary style and content to wider social transformations—for example, the transition from a class society to a mass society (Irving Howe), the domination of men by things in late capitalism (Ihab Hassan), or the emergence of an oppositional youth culture which was 'post-humanist, post-male, post-white, post-heroic' (Leslie Fiedler) (9).

(7) See e.g. Horgan (1998).

(8) See for selective histories of postmodernism: Köhler 1977; Bertens 1995; Kumar 1995; Anderson 1998.

(9) Howe 1963; Hassan 1971: 161; Fiedler 1965: 517.

In this context the postmodernist discourse took off. From the area of literature it extended to other cultural fields—the visual arts, interior design, theater, music, dance, cinema (10). For all those art forms a transition from modernism to postmodernism was noted, though not always for the same reasons. As to the visual arts, postmodernism came to be defined as a break with pure abstractionism and a partial return to figurative art. It came to mean eclecticism, the selective reference to old works of art as well as products of contemporary popular culture. The pop-art of the 1960s was viewed in retrospect as the prime example of the new current. From now on, it was claimed, long-cherished cultural boundaries were increasingly debated, transgressed and blurred—between different disciplines (painting, sculpture, design, photography, film) as well as between high and low culture.

Whereas these ideas circulated within small networks of cultural specialists, it was especially in the realm of architecture that the notion of postmodernism became known among a wider public. Charles Jencks' bestseller *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (1977), in particular, spread the message of postmodernism. Here, the International Style of modern architecture with its sober functionality and anti-ornamentalism was criticized and confronted with a style developed in response to it, labeled as 'post-modern', which freely made use of examples from the past (ranging from Greek temples to modern skyscrapers) to combine them in new, playful ways. In this opposition of modern and postmodern, different architectural forms were presented as expressive of contrasting social values, with the modern style symbolizing bureaucratic rationality, cold efficiency, uniformity and elitism and the postmodern style expressing playfulness, consumption and leisure orientation, variety, pluralism and egalitarianism.

The principle of pluralism was transported from the arts and architecture to philosophy and the sciences by Lyotard in *La condition post-moderne* (1979; English translation 1984), a booklet which not long after its appearance became a *locus classicus* of postmodernism. By advancing the covering concept of 'narrative', Lyotard suggested that scientific theories, philosophical doctrines, political ideologies, religious myths and literary stories were all basically similar—symbolic constructions which never were based on objective reality. And by defining 'the post-modern condition' as 'the end of the grand narratives', or 'incredulity

(10) See for an overview: Connor 1997. Some newly founded journals made postmodernism central to their mission; notably *boundary 2*, subtitled *Journal of Postmodern Literature and Culture* (since 1972) and *October*.

toward metanarratives' (1984: xxiv), he implied that no claim to objective truth could be taken seriously anymore.

This argument helped to bring the postmodernist discourse to the heart of academia. Postmodernism became the label for an approach in the humanities and the social sciences which was opposed to all claims of scientific objectivity and argued instead for epistemological relativism, methodological and theoretical pluralism, critical reflexivity and social and cultural constructivism.

While academic postmodernism overtly rebelled against established scientific methods and scholarly traditions, it nevertheless conformed quite strictly to established academic rules and customs—impersonal language, specialist jargon, footnotes, respectful references. It produced its own introductory textbooks (11) and constructed its own legitimating history by designating a number of founding-fathers, in particular French 'poststructuralists' like Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray. Although these thinkers did not define themselves as postmodernists and hardly used the notion of postmodernity, positive references to their work became one of postmodernism's distinguishing features. Part of the emergence of academic postmodernism was the export of elements of French social philosophy, in which the notion of postmodernity never became prominent, to Anglo-Saxon universities where it exploded.

Academic postmodernism got a strong hold on relatively new fields in areas on the border of the humanities and the social sciences, such as cultural studies, black or ethnic studies and women's or gender studies. It also became influential in established scholarly disciplines like literary studies (where it partly came from and continued to derive inspiration from) and, to a lesser degree, history. In the latter discipline it contributed to the revival of traditional narrativism—in contrast and reaction to a more social-scientific approach—to which it added an outspoken reflexive relativism (12). The idea that all human knowledge consists of narratives, or stories, also proved attractive to theologians.

Where postmodernism got an impact on the social sciences it brought them nearer to the humanities, blurring the boundaries between the two. In cultural anthropology it brought a radicalization of the discipline's doctrine of cultural relativism, which was now turned against the discipline itself: anthropology as it had developed in connection to Western colonialism was a Western enterprise, part of the Western hegemonic

(11) E.g. Lyon 1994; Ashley 1997; Ritzer 1997; Sim 1998.

(12) See e.g. the papers by F.R. Ankersmit and P. Zagorin in Fay *et al.* (eds) 1998.

discourse, which attempted to understand the worlds of the Others by translating them into its own culture-bound categories (13). A similar critique was launched in the adjacent field of development studies where the concept of development itself was attacked as being a reflection of Western, colonial and postcolonial, hegemony (14).

In sociology the notion of the postmodern was used in different ways. Here too, it became the label for constructivist and culturalist approaches—partly rooted in older sociological traditions—which stressed that all forms of human knowledge (science included) were relative to social and cultural conditions, and social reality itself was constituted by cultural definitions (15). In certain branches of sociology, such as the sociology of scientific knowledge or science studies, social constructivism with its relativistic implications became the dominant approach (16). In another usage, the notion of the postmodern in sociology referred to the empirical study and theorizing of ‘postmodernity’ and ‘postmodernization’ processes, transitions from the ‘modern’ to the ‘postmodern’ society (17). In line with that which is typical for the postmodernist discourse in general, these two sociological usages of postmodern/postmodernity/postmodernism were often linked to one another; but this was not always and necessarily the case (18). In other words, a postmodernist sociological approach does not necessarily imply, nor is implied by, a sociology of postmodernity or postmodernization.

Postmodernism also came to be associated with applied fields such as organization and management studies, public administration, education and pedagogy (19). In all these fields the principle of epistemological uncertainty was translated into the assumption of uncertainty-in-practice for managers, administrators and educators and a critique of rationalist models of bureaucratic planning and regulation. Company managers could only be successful when they recognized that no guidelines could guarantee success; public administrators had to be aware of the limits of state intervention; and educators had to confront problems relating to what and how to teach when there was no longer a canon of superior knowledge and culture.

(13) Clifford & Marcus (eds) 1986; James *et al.* (eds) 1997. See for criticisms: Sangren 1988, with commentaries in the same issue of *Current Anthropology*; and Gellner 1992: 22 ff.

(14) Escobar 1995; Gardner & Lewis 1996; Lieten 2001.

(15) Denzin 1986; Seidman 1991.

(16) Giere 1993.

(17) E.g. Bauman 1989; Lash 1990; Fea-

therstone 1991; Crook *et al.* 1992; Inglehart 1997. An earlier, not very influential, use of the concept of the postmodern society was by Etzioni 1968.

(18) For a discussion of these and related issues, see the essays in *Contemporary Sociology*, 25, 1 (1996): 1-27, esp. Van den Berg 1996: 19-25.

(19) See e.g. Boje *et al.* 1996.

The fact that the label of postmodernism has been used in so many different cultural fields makes it all the more difficult to define its common characteristics. Both within and between these fields disagreements on what it means abound. However, the fact that the same label has been used for these different fields is already an indication of interactions and mutual influence. The uses in different fields have not been unrelated. Its popular use in art and architecture, for example, co-determined its meanings in philosophy, the humanities and the social sciences. Postmodern thinking in these latter fields in turn influenced the debates on arts and literature. In all these fields, 'postmodern' was used as a broad concept, intended to link phenomena in different fields, to break through disciplinary boundaries and to undermine conventional distinctions such as between high—and low—culture, or fantasy and reality.

Given these interactions we may speak of one cultural movement with common features or at least 'family resemblances'. Postmodernism in its various branches came to be associated with liberation from restrictive (artistic, scientific, bureaucratic, etc.) rules; recognition, tolerance and encouragement of plurality and difference (of styles, methods, theories, social groups, subcultures); rejection of authority and cultural hierarchies; transgression of disciplinary and cultural boundaries; relativism (epistemological, esthetic, moral, cultural); reflexivity; symbolism; dynamism coupled with a rejection of the idea of progress; and a critique of objectivism/realism as well as of individualistic subjectivism. Postmodernism defines itself by contrasting these features with those of modernism/modernity, which is associated with restrictive rules, uniformity, authoritarianism and cultural hierarchization and the belief in progress, rationality and objective truth (20).

(20) This definition of 'modernity' is one of the problematical features of postmodernism. Contrary to its proclaimed anti-essentialism, it tends to interpret history in essentialist terms. In actual fact there has never been a historical period in the West (or elsewhere) where the beliefs in rationality and progress were general and uncontested. The Enlightenment since the 18th century almost immediately evoked a 'Counter-Enlightenment' (Berlin 1997: 1-25) with its various versions of political Conservatism and cultural Romanticism. A postmodernist solution to this problem is to define modern and postmodern as nonhistorical categories, so that e.g. Shakespeare's plays, Montaigne's essays or even St John's Gospel could be regarded as 'postmodern'. Conceived in this way, the notion of the postmodern loses

its potential historical and sociological significance, its function in bringing to light socio-cultural characteristics typical of the present age. It is one of postmodernism's paradoxes that it tends to reject systematic historical or developmental theorizing whereas its central concept literally refers to a historical time-sequence.

Another problem with the postmodernist definition of modernity is that it suggests a direct and fixed causal connection between rationality and bureaucratic planning on the one hand and oppression on the other. A well-known example of this position is Bauman's book on 'Modernity and the Holocaust' which explains the Holocaust as the logical consequence of modernity's quest for bureaucratic state control (Bauman 1989). However, while

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In the vast literature on postmodernism there is no lack of suggestions on how to explain it. Just as in the case of other cultural complexes, these explanations tend toward either internalism or externalism (21): they see postmodernism either as the result of an autonomous cultural process, the outcome of dynamics inherent in modernism, or as the reflection of broader social forces. When, for example, Ihab Hassan (1971: 139), the literary critic, wrote that the ‘postmodern spirit lies coiled within the great corpus of modernism’, he suggested an internalist explanation. And where Lyotard (1979) regarded the emergence of perspectivism in physics as the logical result of advanced scientific research (22), he did the same.

Sociological externalist explanations, on the other hand, connect postmodernism to macrosocial transformations and regard it as the cultural expression or reflection of these transformations. This is the view elaborated in critical (neo-)Marxist interpretations like those of David Harvey (1989) and Fredric Jameson (1991). Postmodernism is conceived here as the ‘cultural logic’ of a new phase in the development of capitalism—the transition from Fordism to flexible accumulation in the organization of production (Harvey), or the ultimate triumph of market capitalism and its penetration into the spheres of consumption, leisure and the arts (Jameson). Earlier, Daniel Bell (1976: 51-54) had suggested a non-Marxist externalist interpretation where he connected the emergence of postmodernism to the coming of post-industrial society and viewed it as the expression of the ‘cultural contradictions of capitalism’ which historically rested on a sober work ethic but increasingly fostered hedonist consumerism.

bureaucratization was part of modernization processes everywhere, this did not imply the ideal nor the practice of unlimited state control (let alone of genocide). Bauman tends to generalize on the basis of historical episodes in Central and Eastern Europe (Fascism and Communism) rather than Western Europe and North America. Moreover and even more importantly, the fact that modern bureaucratic and technological means made the Holocaust possible does not answer the question of why it happened. Bauman ignores the irrationalism inherent in German National-Socialism without which any answer is incomplete.

(21) Internalism is typical for the conventional history of ideas, externalism for the macroscopic sociology of knowledge, as in Karl Mannheim’s work. Specialists in the sociology of scientific knowledge often claim to have overcome the internalism-externalism dichotomy and the shortcomings of both approaches are now often recognized in other fields as well. Yet much work in this direction still has to be done.

(22) Critized by Sokal & Bricmont 1998: 125-136.

All these explanations, while not necessarily wrong, are at least insufficient and one-sided. Whereas internalist interpretations neglect the social embeddedness of the culture to be explained, externalist interpretations neglect its specificities. Any internalist explanation can at best be partial, given the fact that postmodernism covers so many different, interacting fields which never have an independent existence of their own. Externalist explanations, on the other hand, lack specificity and do not do justice to the relative autonomy of the various fields. While suggesting plausible causal connections, they also tend to be tautological and self-affirmative by collapsing the *explanans* and the *explanandum*: postmodernism/postmodernity is not only explained but also defined as the cultural reflection of a supposed structural base.

What are neglected in both the internalist and the externalist explanations are the specific positions of those who constructed and moulded postmodernism as a cultural movement: the cultural specialists—intellectuals, artists, scholars—who brought the term postmodern into use and gave it meanings. Postmodernism, I assume, is primarily constructed and reconstructed by these cultural specialists. They cooperate and compete with one another in different fields (Bourdieu 1993), social networks (*cf.* Collins 1998), worlds (Becker 1982) or figurations (Elias 1978) which have a certain degree of autonomy with respect to the wider society of which they are a part (23). This means that the specialists' cultural achievements cannot be reduced to the structure of the society as a whole; they must be connected primarily to their position within a given field and secondarily to the field's place within wider social figurations.

This analysis purports to transcend the dichotomies of internalism versus externalism, individualism versus holism, voluntarism versus determinism and culturalism versus social structuralism. Within the space of this article, only a schematic and tentative explanation of postmodernism along these lines can be offered. It is aimed to be used as a source of hypotheses and further theoretical and empirical explorations.

For reasons of clarity, three main cultural fields are distinguished: the artistic, the intellectual and the academic field. The *artistic field* is taken here in the broad sense in which it includes literary fiction and poetry as well as applied arts such as architecture and industrial design. Its core consists of interdependent professional art specialists: creative artists (painters, composers, writers, etc.), performers (musicians, actors),

(23) The references in the text indicate the theoretical approach followed here. In particular, Bourdieu's concept of 'field' is used. *Cf.* for a comparable approach: Heilbron 1995.

organizers and entrepreneurs in the art worlds (such as museum directors, gallery owners, publishers) and experts who write about the arts (art and literary critics, art historians, literary scholars). The *intellectual field* is defined, rather narrowly, as consisting primarily of authors who develop and reflect on general ideas and try to make them relevant for current social and political issues. Being participants in ‘the public debate’, these authors, in general, also aim to make more lasting contributions to the store of human knowledge and therefore tend to keep at arm’s length from day-to-day politics. Professionally they may be independent writers, journalists, academicians, researchers or even politicians. The *academic field*, in contrast, has a more clearly demarcated institutional base; its core consists of those who work at universities and similar institutions of higher learning and combine teaching, research and writing.

None of these three fields is a sharply bounded and homogeneous whole. They are internally differentiated; within each of them a diversity of subfields can be distinguished. And they do not have rigid boundaries which demarcate the one from the other. Some core members of one field may also participate in another one. Thus, the artistic and the academic fields overlap in the shared participation by art historians, literary scholars and artists and architects who teach at universities or similar institutions. The intellectual field considerably overlaps with the other two as many intellectuals are professionally located in the academic or in the artistic field. Apart from these overlappings, the three fields are strongly interconnected through lines of communication, mutual influence and rivalry. Each of them is also connected to other societal spheres. Thus, there is a particularly strong interconnection between the intellectual field and the political field as well as between the artistic field and the world of the popular media. The professional specialists in the three fields are, moreover, dependent on consumers who often occupy a core position in another field— theater and museum visitors, art collectors, etc. in the artistic field, readers and buyers of books and journals in the intellectual field, students and research financiers in the academic field.

*Postmodernism in the artistic field: classifications, distinctions and rivalries*

Postmodernism can be seen as, among other things, one of those ‘isms’ in arts and literature that refer to differences in style and are expressive of rivalries among participants in the artistic field. Competition is the driving force of innovation, which brings with it the need for

classification, the labeling and legitimation of the new which is part of the competitive game itself. Proclaiming a new style, a new perspective with a new name is a strategy by which writers, artists and critics try to capture attention within and outside the field. If successful, the new name for the style is established through mass media and educational programs and becomes part of the cultural repertoire of the well-educated.

With respect to postmodernism, as mentioned, historical priority has to be given to a group of literary critics. Literary works have traditionally been interpreted very often as expressions of the spirit of the times, and this is what these critics did when they advanced the concept of postmodernism. Their efforts had mixed results. On the one hand, they were very successful in establishing the notion of the postmodern in the literary subfield and beyond that, among widening groups of cultural specialists. On the other hand, they did not succeed in bringing clarity and consensus in regard to what 'postmodern literature' actually is. Several critics presented it as a continuation and radicalization of characteristics of literary Modernism, such as non-linearity, which implied that its distinctiveness was not very outspoken. And those literary works most often designated as postmodern (like the novels of Robert Pynchon) hardly reached a readers' audience wider than literary specialists and their students. Literary postmodernism remained predominantly a specialists' affair, strongly tied to the academic field.

Postmodernism as a label for a new style became much more influential in the subfield of architecture. This had at least two explanations. First, unlike other art forms, architecture is visible to everyone; it cannot be avoided, has to be seen, recognized and liked or disliked. Second, the distinction between modern and postmodern could be made here with relative ease since modernist architecture—unlike modernist painting, for example—was largely identified with one style: the International Style practised and propagated by such architects as Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe. Architectural modernism had broken with tradition and retro-styles by combining an aesthetics of ascetic purity with an ideology of efficiency and functionality and the use of new techniques and materials. After its experimental beginnings in the 1920s and 1930s it expanded in the first decades after the Second World War, when shortages in dwellings and office buildings as well as a booming economy led to vast and hastily organized building programs. Precisely because modernism had become dominant, it invited a critical reaction among innovative architects. And precisely because modernism was easily recognizable, the label postmodernism served a clear function.

The classifying and legitimating work of authors such as Robert Venturi and Charles Jencks contributed to the success of the new style and the prestige of its creators. Buildings like the Bonaventure hotel in Los Angeles, the AT&T skyscraper in New York and the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao became icons of postmodernism, referred to in tourist guides and admired by large numbers of visitors.

A more complicated development took place in the field of the free visual arts. More than architects, 'free' artists feel the pressure for originality and innovation; their autonomy is much less significantly limited by clients' wishes and considerations of utility. At the same time, however, they are more dependent on taste specialists such as art critics and gallery owners. Their search for originality often took the form of group formation and manifestos to announce a radical innovation (as happened many times since the proclamation of Impressionism in the 1860s). But in the second half of the 20th century this became increasingly difficult, precisely because of the plurification of styles, which was the consequence of the same pressure for originality coupled with a strong expansion of the artistic field (24).

Postmodernism in the visual arts should be viewed in this light. It became the label for pop-art and later developed styles which tried to be original by denying originality, innovative by rejecting uniqueness and personal authenticity and provocative by accepting vulgarity and *kitsch*. (Such features were not completely new however; Dada artists around 1918 had already experimented with collage, pastiche and ready-mades.) This was interpreted as being expressive of basic changes in the artistic field in general, summarized in such phrases as the 'death of the avant-garde' or even 'the end of art' (25): artistic innovations had exhausted themselves; art had lost its liberating potential in a culture in which 'anything goes'; and commercialized mass culture had become so pervasive that it could no longer be avoided. By defining itself in contradistinction to modernism, postmodernism suggested that the modernist era is over, the era in which radical progress-oriented avant-gardes caused a permanent artistic revolution in their oppositions to predecessors, conventional bourgeois culture and mass culture at the same time.

(24) Norbert Elias already observed this plurification of artistic styles in the 1930s (Elias 1935). Since the 1950s and 1960s, however, in connection to the unprecedented rate of economic growth, the expansion of the artistic field—in terms of numbers of artists, artistic production and art museums—accelerated, which contributed to an ever-increasing, confusing diversity. To take only

examples of the expansion of museums: 'In the United States alone 600 new art museums have opened since 1970; in France 400 museums were built or renovated during the 14 years of François Mitterand's presidency (1981 to 1995)' (Newhouse 1998: 12).

(25) Cf. Oliva 1980; Danto 1997; Foster 1983.

Here the idea of the postmodern went beyond the designation of artistic styles and acquired a sociological significance. Indeed, the relations within and between artistic (sub)fields and between these fields and the wider society did change in connection to large-scale social transformations since the 1950s. The growth of the consumption of luxury goods among the majority of the population of Western societies (26), the expansion of a commercial leisure industry and the growing significance of mass media messages and images for people's daily experiences challenged and blurred the dividing lines between 'pure' art, applied arts and commercial entertainment and undermined established cultural hierarchies. Parts of what used to be defined as 'mass culture' (think for example of jazz or rock music) were culturally upgraded. Other parts, from punk to pornography, superseded high-culture in provoking conventional bourgeois morality. The institutionalization of artistic innovation led to the paradoxical result that artistic opposition became more difficult; the romantic—as well as modernist—model of the deviant, misunderstood genius could hardly be maintained in a time when all kinds of artistic deviance were quickly recognized and celebrated and therefore ceased to be deviant. This pertained not only to art itself but also to the artists' social role and self-image; with the informalization of lifestyles in Western societies, particularly since the 1960s, the contrasts between artistic self-chosen outsiders and conventional insiders, bohemians and conformists, anti-bourgeois and bourgeois lost much of their sharpness and ceased to function as strong images with which people defined their own and others' identities (27).

These sociocultural changes were selectively perceived and incorporated in the notion of postmodernism as used in the artistic field. Postmodernism in this context was not a simple reflection of these broader changes. The concept was used to make competitive claims about that which was valuable and meaningful and that which was not. It was helpful in making new distinctions by attacking older ones.

### *The intellectual discourse and political change*

Another line in the sociogenesis of the postmodern discourse—though not an independent one—is to be found in the intellectual field, among authors and readers who combined a philosophical interest in questions of truth with a longing for political impact. Lyotard is perhaps the quintessential example of this. His proclamation of the end of the

(26) Featherstone 1991: esp. 67-71.

(27) Cf. Wouters 1986.

grand narratives becomes more understandable when we specify it to one grand narrative which is hardly an explicit topic in his argument—Marxism. More than any other doctrine, Marxism combines the beliefs in rationality, progress and human emancipation. Like so many Western intellectuals, Lyotard had been a Marxist in and around the 1960s but subsequently disengaged from the movement (28). Now that Marxism or any version of radical socialism has been discredited, he and many others intimated, any belief in human rationality and progress has to be abandoned. When this grand narrative does not work, there are no grand narratives to sustain. Postmodernism seemed to be here, first and foremost, post-Marxism. In its total rejection of any ‘totalizing’ belief in rationality and progress, postmodernism might be conceived as a new grand narrative which paradoxically proclaims the end of all grand narratives.

The move from Marxism and radical socialism to ideological scepticism, political quietism and philosophical relativism has been typical for many intellectuals who lived through the 1950s to 1980s. It also applies, for example, to such well-known postmodern thinkers as Jean Baudrillard and Zygmunt Bauman (29). Besides—and connected to—aesthetic, epistemological and moral relativism, postmodernism came to be associated with a form of political relativism which regarded any belief in progress and social planning as not only ill-founded but also dangerous and harmful.

Part of the explanation of postmodernism should answer the question why this happened; or to be more specific, why so many intellectuals in the 20th century were attracted to one or another version of Marxism, why its appeal became even stronger in the second half of the 1960s and why it weakened dramatically in the 1970s and 1980s. Its impact on mass movements notwithstanding, Marxism was first and foremost an intellectual doctrine, to begin with its founders Marx and Engels (30). Its intellectual appeal lay in the combination of rationality, moral justness and social utility; scientific truth, won by systematic thinking and serious study, was claimed to be the basis of moral justness and the promise of a better future. By embracing Marxism, intellectuals could remain critically detached from the impure worlds of business and practical politics, while at the same time engaging themselves to a movement which fought for a better world. This was all the more

(28) Lyotard had been a member of the radical Parisian group *Socialisme ou barbarie*, as Jameson mentions in his introduction to Lyotard (1984).

(29) Another example is the American sociologist Steven Seidman (Ashley 1997: esp. 71). About Bauman, see Smith 1999.

(30) Cf. Gouldner 1976.

attractive when the movement grew stronger and thereby sustained the hopes for a better future. Such seemed to be the case for some years in the 1960s and early 1970s, particularly in Third World countries. Western intellectuals were invited to identify with Marxist 'liberation movements' (Cuba, Vietnam, Maoist China), which they connected with domestic class struggles. Soon after, however, an opposite trend set in, which proved to be the more enduring one. Marxism lost its appeal due to a conjuncture of international and Western, long-term and short term changes: communist regimes became less effective in hiding their ugly sides from the outside world (even for left-wing intellectuals); economic recessions in the West led to the weakening of organized labour and cuts in welfare state expenditures; reorganizations in the business world had similar effects; and the diminishing size and weakening identity of the Western working classes undermined socialism's mass basis.

These same changes meant ideological difficulty for the more moderate versions of Western socialism as well. Their hopes for a gradual development toward a more egalitarian society in which the central government would play the central regulating role, were undermined. The progressive moderates too had to cope with serious doubts and became more susceptible to postmodern ideas that declared these doubts as true signs of the times.

Apart from the fact that postmodernism did not recognize itself as a new grand narrative, it supremely ignored another grand narrative that emerged in the 1970s and became dominant in the 1980s: neoliberalism. The simultaneity of the emergence and spread of postmodernism and neoliberalism in the Western world was no coincidence; nor was the fact that the impact of the two ideologies was the strongest in the core capitalist nation, the USA. Postmodernism and neoliberalism were both connected to the social developments that had also contributed to the decline of Marxism and other versions of socialism. Both narratives (to use the postmodern term) held certain assumptions in common; they expressed a deep revulsion against bureaucratic planning and state intervention (including the institutions of the welfare state) and they both ignored class inequalities and, more generally, power-dependence relations.

This is not to suggest that postmodernism is neoliberalism in disguise (or the other way around). Neoliberalism is much more directly tied to economic and political practices, interests and power. Postmodernism reflects the attitudes of participants in cultural fields who do not simply conform to prevailing economic and political views. Whereas economic and political changes in the last decades of the 20th century had their

impact on the intellectual field, some basic characteristics of the intellectual field within the Western social context did not change significantly. Intellectuals remained positionally and mentally detached from the worlds of business and practical politics. Deprived of the major prizes of economic and political success, they often responded by downgrading these worldly rewards in the name of higher human values and superior knowledge. Their symbolic rivalry with the worlds of business and politics could take the form of either a retreat into devoted scholarship, pure science or *l'art pour l'art*, or an engagement with struggles against the (or some of the) worldly powers. Marxism was one version of the latter option. Postmodernism, its successor to some extent, was a move toward the first option, but only partially; it was also a continuation of the intellectual tendency to condemn the world as it is in the name of higher values and deeper insights. Relativism was paradoxically connected here to moralism.

*Postmodernism and the new social movements*

This moralistic element came to the fore where postmodernism was aligned to 'new' social movements, or 'identity movements'. Organisations of women, gays, people of color and other minorities became the primary locus of political and moral action for increasing numbers of people after the demise of the old class movements. These new movements do not occupy a core position in one of the three main fields distinguished here, but they are related to both the intellectual and the academic field, where they created their own niches.

Postmodernism called for a critique of 'totalizing', universalist, objectivist ideas, found in the canonized books of 'dead white males' and the hegemonic structures behind them. The dominant, objectivist perspectives had to be 'deconstructed' in order to demonstrate their biased nature and as a means of liberating oneself from their impact and winning a space for the suppressed perspectives represented by minorities. While stressing the importance of being different, postmodernism paradoxically could unite various people who stressed being different (such as 'people of color, sexual rebels, Third World gays, working-class gays, butches and fems', to quote the sociologist Steven Seidman (31)) by offering them an overarching common perspective with the same concepts and ways of thinking.

'Identity movements', i.e. groups of people who seek to define their common characteristics in distinction from and in opposition to more

(31) Quoted by Ashley 1997: 71.

powerful groups, are by no means new. All emancipation movements that are not completely assimilationist can be labelled as such. German intellectuals, who in the late 18th century stressed the superiority of their 'culture' in comparison with the superficial 'civilisation' of the nobility, were an identity movement (32), just as middle-class nationalists and working-class socialists in all countries of Europe in the 19th and early 20th century. What is relatively new is the widespread use of the *term* 'identity' in the definitions of the groups these movements claimed to represent. Unlike concepts such as 'spirit', 'soul', 'character' or even 'interest', the use of 'identity' is commonly associated with the idea that group characteristics are socially and symbolically constructed rather than manifestations of a given essence. 'Identity' in this sense is not a fate but, to a certain extent, a choice; it is not fixed but changeable.

This shift from concepts such as character and spirit to 'identity' can be related to what might be called individualization processes: increasing social and geographical mobility, growing freedom of choice for individuals in subsequent phases of their lives (and by implication the necessity of making individual choices), diminishing stability of intimate personal relations and group memberships and, as a consequence, greater reflexivity with respect to one's 'self-identity'. Though several of these changes were already observed by the classical social scientists in the 19th century, there are indications that these processes accelerated and entered into a new phase in Western societies since the 1960s, when growing prosperity, the extension of welfare state provisions and the expansion of mass education opened up new possibilities for large masses of the population (33). Identity problems were particularly acute, we may presume, for socially mobile persons. Women with a working-class or an ethnic minority background, for instance, who entered the universities were likely to sense a distance between themselves and their families of origin on the one hand, and their new academic milieu on the other. And precisely because such mobility tracks were not confined to a few exceptional individuals, these new groups could define their problems in terms of shared experiences. The 'identity politics' of the new social movements, while related to processes of individualization, sought to create in-group solidarities and define collective identities rather than cultivate individualism and subjectivism.

With the help of postmodernism, these efforts could be intellectually grounded. But here again, postmodernism is more than a reflection of

(32) Elias 2000: 5-30.

(33) Cf. Giddens 1991; Wilterdink 1995.

macro-social developments. Its insistence on the socially and symbolically constructed nature of identities betrays a reflexive attitude which cannot be separated from the position of intellectuals who specialize in reading and writing. The new identity movements found a place at the universities, where they were institutionalized under such names as women's studies, gender studies, black studies and ethnic and racial studies which opened entries to scholarly pursuits. Postmodernism helped to give direction to these endeavors by focussing on texts and discourses and defining group conflicts as verbal contests. In this way these movements, while stressing their otherness, were also hedged in by the academic system.

*Competition in the academic field*

Postmodernism's institutionalization at universities brings us to another line in its sociogenesis: the changing competitive relations between and within disciplines in the academic field. At least since the 19th century, the academic field is characterized by tensions between two broad subfields, the natural sciences and the humanities. The social sciences, developed later, forged an uncertain middle-ground (34).

Postmodernism established itself in parts of the humanities and the social sciences where knowledge is uncertain, disagreements abound and theoretical progress is problematic. The criticism of being 'nonscientific' to which this situation may give cause is met by postmodernists who state that *all* human knowledge, including the scientific knowledge of nature, is socially constructed, culture-bound, perspectivist, discourse-dependent and therefore not in any sense an objective reflection of reality. This affirms the basic equality between the (natural) sciences and the humanities. But postmodernism tends to go even further by claiming superiority with respect to the natural sciences: most scientists fail to see the socially constructed, culture-bound, discourse-dependent nature of their knowledge and therefore make ill-founded claims to objective truth; moreover, since all knowledge is human, the field of the natural sciences ultimately belongs to the humanities/social sciences. This is suggested, for example, by Derrida's often repeated statement that there is nothing outside 'text', an idea that can only emerge among people whose daily work consists of reading, interpreting and producing texts.

(34) Lepenies 1985.

Postmodernism in these respects is remarkably similar to the self-definition of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, the humanities or ‘sciences of the mind’, in Germany more than a century ago: these disciplines described and interpreted the achievements of the human mind in their endless variety, which were manifestations of essential human freedom and therefore not subject to any scientific law. Then as now, the ‘sciences of the mind’ were not only defined in distinction and opposition to the natural sciences, but advanced as comprising the whole reality, including natural science and its subject-matter. Just as postmodernism tends to conceive reality as consisting of texts or discourses or symbolic constructions, German philosophical idealism understood reality as *Geist*, as ‘mind’ or ‘spirit’. As Richard Rorty (1982) remarked, late 20th-century textualism can be seen as a recent version of the 19th-century idealism, which gave a philosophical foundation to the definition of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. Similar in content, these two perspectives had a similar social basis in the competitive relations within the academic field and particularly between the subfields of the natural sciences and the humanities.

There are, however, also important differences both in content and social basis. One is the enormous expansion of higher education and of scientific and scholarly production since the 19th century. This has led to textual overproduction, a situation in which much more is published in any field than even the most industrious expert can hope to read. It has also led to a multiplication of object-specific specialisations and, in the humanities and the social sciences, to a proliferation of theories, perspectives, approaches, methods and styles among which it is difficult to choose. Confronted with such a bewildering variety, students and scholars are likely to develop attitudes of careful eclecticism, prudent scepticism and relativism (35). Postmodernism expressed and justified relativism by presenting the plurality of perspectives as normal, inevitable and even desirable.

Relativism or scepticism itself—the idea that objective truth does not exist or cannot be known—has a long tradition in Western philosophy (36). In this respect, postmodernism, contrary to what it often claimed, was far from new. What was relatively new was the extent to which relativism became a tenet among certain groups of academicians, was the starting-point of scholarly endeavors and was taken as the basis of a critique of academic disciplines themselves. Postmodernism offered a way out of the mental paralysis to which relativism can lead by stimulating and legitimating research into the ways reality is symbolically

(35) Cf. Collins 1998: 522.

(36) Cf. Goudsblom 1980.

‘constructed’ in texts, narratives, or discourses. It privileged one type of reality over another; whereas the real existence of the signified was systematically put into doubt, the existence of the symbolic signifiers was, apparently, not questioned.

The expansion of university education in Western countries had still other consequences for academic disciplines. The transformation of the universities from elite institutions to organisations for mass education had a particularly disturbing effect on the academic subfield of arts and literature. The traditional function of this subfield was the interpretation, canonization and transmission of the high-culture borne by the educated upper and upper-middle strata of society. Among the professors and their students there used to be a broad taste correspondence, rooted in similar social backgrounds and socialization experiences. This changed with the influx of growing numbers of students from lower-middle class and working-class as well as ethnic minority origins. The old, class-related hierarchy of taste, knowledge and culture was undermined and the humanities lost much of their once seemingly natural legitimacy, connected to in ideals of superior taste and erudition. One response to this loss of legitimacy consisted in efforts towards ‘scientification’ of parts of the humanities—history, linguistics, the study of literature. This trend, which was quite strong in the 1960s, did not lead to the results its proponents had expected. Another response to the weakening of traditional legitimacy sources for the humanities was postmodernism, which was at the same time a critical reaction to the efforts at scientification. Postmodernism did not only reject ‘scientific’ methods in the study of human culture, it also cultivated an attitude of animosity or even hostility to the natural sciences. Such sentiments could also be found in the social sciences, which had always been a battlefield for the clash between ‘the two cultures’. Here too, postmodernism was a new way of criticizing scientific approaches within the field as well as of questioning the value and validity of scientific knowledge in general.

### *Concluding remarks*

The explanation suggested here has been divided into four parts:

- First, there are the dynamics in the artistic field, including literature and architecture, leading to the succession and differentiation of

- styles for which classificatory distinctions are invented, elaborated, propagated and also criticized.
- Second, there is the position of ‘committed intellectuals’ who combine critical detachment from the worlds of politics and business with the wish to be socially and politically influential and who after Marxism’s loss of credibility gave up hopes for rational progress.
  - Third, there are the so-called new social movements or identity movements of self-proclaimed minorities, which offered new options for social action after the demise of class-based socialism and which secured positions at universities.
  - And fourth, there are the competitive relations within the academic field, which expanded and differentiated in the course of time.

These four partial explanations all refer to changes within three overlapping and interconnected areas of cultural production: the artistic, the intellectual and the academic fields. These, in turn, are connected to wider societal processes in Western societies, such as the growth of prosperity and the extension of leisure for large masses of the population, the blurring of class divisions, the increase of social and geographical mobility, the expansion of symbolic-cultural production and processes of ‘individualization’. Postmodernism was created by culture specialists, but it was not an autonomous creation. Nor was it an automatic reflection of the broad social processes that had an impact on their position and orientation. These processes were selectively perceived and interpreted, depending on the characteristics of the field and the specialists’ position within it.

I conclude with a few final remarks. First, though the explanation offered here is more comprehensive than the usual ones, it cannot pretend to be complete. No attention has been paid, for example, to the remarkable increase of postmodernist publications in the field of religion/theology in recent years, as Table 2 shows, nor to the extension of postmodernism to applied fields such as management studies. And national differences in relation to international connections have hardly been touched upon. While postmodernism is an international affair and had an impact throughout the Western world and even beyond, the core of its development is to be located in the United States or, more broadly, the Anglo-Saxon countries. Postmodernism was defined here by incorporating ideas of French social philosophers who never identified with the movement. The notion of the postmodern as such remain-

ed rather marginal in France (37). It is particularly this French-Anglo-Saxon connection which asks for further exploration.

A second remark concerns the time-sequence. The order in which the four partial explanations were presented is a more or less chronological one. The postmodernist discourse originated in the artistic field, then moved to the intellectual and the academic fields. It was in connection to the arts (in the broad sense) that postmodernism first became trendy and it was in the same field that it subsequently lost its appeal. Its penetration into the academic field, on the other hand, was slower and more durable. Here the investments in postmodernism (through scholarly work, journals, research groups, courses, textbooks, chairs) were larger, which increased the chances of its continuity. It is to be expected therefore that, particularly in academia, postmodernism will stay with us for some time.

A final word on the question of how to assess postmodernism's contested and controversial cultural achievements. To answer this question was not the aim of this article, which purported to understand the sociogenesis of postmodernism rather than to evaluate its results. This does not mean, however, that I have taken a fully neutral position. My analysis will have been influenced by my positive and negative judgments and more in particular by my scepticism as to much of what postmodernism stands for. This does not pertain to, for example, postmodernist architecture or design (which one may like or not) nor to the use of the term postmodern in various other contexts. It does not even apply, in principle, to sociological theories of postmodernity or postmodernization, which can throw light on important recent and contemporary transformations in Western societies and their interconnections. My criticism concerns first and foremost postmodernist theory in so far as it claims to offer a radical alternative to conventional 'modern' science by celebrating multiperspectivism and relativism, rejecting universalism and the idea of objectivity or intersubjectivity, denying progress or even development and reducing reality to symbolic discourses or texts. The analysis followed here was, in this sense, a non-postmodernist approach to postmodernism. It remains a challenge for sociologists to study it without accepting its premises.

(37) On the reception of postmodernism in France, particularly in the literary field, see *Oeuvres et Critiques*, XXIII (1998), 1 and esp. the contribution by Gontard (1998). One of

the few French sociologists who has written explicitly on 'postmodernity' is Touraine 1993.

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