NOTES ON POSTMODERNISM

General postmodernist themes:

• no unified postmodern social theory; conflicting notions of the postmodern; defined more by what is rejected; tendency toward relativism and nihilism

• rejection of all universalizing theories or grand narratives (liberalism, Marxism, etc.); totalizing narratives are identified with totalitarian and terroristic politics

• rejection of Enlightenment faith in an intrinsic connection between reason and freedom; scientific reason seen as basis of domination

• anti-realism; rejection of knowledge/discourse as representing objective reality; rejection of ability to adjudicate conflicting validity claims

• political pessimism; anti-utopianism; disillusion with liberal ideas of progress and radical hopes for emancipation

Three related strands of postmodernism:

• postmodernist art, especially architecture

• poststructuralist philosophy and social theory

• notion of radical rupture with past modern era (theory of postindustrial society, post-Fordism)

Postmodernist art:

• architecture: reaction against international style in which form follows function; playful and self-conscious heterogeneity constructed of fragments of past and mass culture

• general themes: self-consciousness; juxtaposition of fragments; emphasis on paradox, ambiguity, uncertainty; dehumanization and disintegration of the integrated personality
postmodernism merely continues and intensifies modernist
art movements of the turn-of-the-century

From structuralism to post-structuralism:

- language not merely suggestive model for analyzing
  society; society is language (discourse)

- textualism (especially Derrida; deconstruction):
treatment of science and philosophy as merely different
literary genres; all texts reduced to an array of
rhetorical devices, deconstruction of these rhetorical
devices subverts the authority of knowledges

- radicalization of Saussurean linguistics: production of
meaning conceived as an endless chain of signifiers;
rejection of atomistic theory of meaning taken to the
extreme in denial of any relation of discourse to reality

- structuralism and post-structuralism both reject
transcendent human subject; see subject as constructed by
ensemble of social relations; but structuralism sees this
ensemble as forming a totality

- structuralism rejects reductionistic totality
  (essentialism, economism) for a complex totality
constituted through relations of difference among
relatively autonomous levels; post-structuralism rejects
totality altogether, leaving only plurality and
difference

- structuralism rejects empiricism and positivism for the
analysis of deep structures (theoretical realism); post-
structuralism rejects realism for relativism

- Marxian structuralism encouraged concrete political-
economic analysis over culture critique, while post-
structuralism returns to the traditional Western Marxist
preoccupation with culture (now everything is culture)

- structuralism conceives of itself as scientific, while
post-structuralism rejects science

Nietzschean influence on postmodernism:

- individual subject as a historically contingent construct
beneath whose apparent unity throbs a welter of
conflicting unconscious drives and desires
• heterogeneous character of reality; reflects the perpetual struggle (will to power) of different power centers

• human history is a process of unending conflict from which successive forms of domination arise

• scientific rationality is only another variant of the will to power (domination of nature); thought cannot be validated in terms of correspondence with reality, but only in relation to the will to power that it serves

Foucault:
• more sociological, less textualist; discourse situated in relation to relations of power

• genealogy: seeks contingent, lowly beginnings; discontinuity emphasized over continuity; surface meanings over hidden meanings and essences; petty motives underpin history

• body is implicated in the operation of power; micro-level techniques of controlling bodies; power is built up from the micro to the macro level

• power-knowledge: rejects "myth" that knowledge is external to power; every power relation entails the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge; human sciences closely related to the spread of disciplinary technologies

• multiplicity of power relations; none privileged; emphasis on the seemingly marginal forms of power

• power is productive, constituting and enabling individuals, not repressive of some pre-existing essence

• power necessarily entails resistance, albeit fragmentary and decentralized

• affinity with local, single-issue politics of the "new" social movements

Post-industrial society:
• variety of technological determinism; from agriculture to industry to services
• shift from goods production to services; central role played by theoretical knowledge

• "knowledge society" dominated by professional and technical elite

• critique: manufacturing still central; services expand mainly at the expense of agriculture; decline in relative manufacturing employment, but not output; manufacturing continues to grow worldwide in NICs; goods continually substitute for services; white-collar and service employment is mainly at the bottom of the occupational scale

Post-Fordism:

• disaggregation of mass market into segmented niches; design emphasized over use value; shorter production runs; smaller productive units; flexible production; just-in-time inventory control

• smaller, multi-skill workforce replaces masses of semi-skilled workers; increased worker participation; labor market segmentation, rise of underclass

• bureaucratic unions, mass political parties, and centralized welfare states become inappropriate to more differentiated workforce

• globalization of the economy undermines state control and Keynesianism

• critique: exaggerates both pervasiveness of Fordism and uniqueness and extension of new patterns

Cultural consequences of postindustrialism:

• lack of social identity; narcissism; hedonism (Bell)

• explosion of images; dissolution of and distinction between image (simulation) and the real (Baudrillard)