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 universializing 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; narcisissm; hedonism (Bell)

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