

DOI: 10.26468/trakyasobed.1684503

Trakya University Journal of Social Sciences, 27(2), 286–296, 2025

Metaphorical Approaches to Postmodernity

Postmoderniteye Metaforik Yaklaşımlar

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ABSTRACT

Sociologists, seeking to understand and explain the social reality in which they live and the changes occurring within it, have approached the subject through various conceptualizations and typologies, thereby making significant contributions to the field of social sciences. In this context, although the distinction between traditional and modern society was long used to explain the changes and transformations experienced by societies, the typology based on the distinction between modern and postmodern has recently come to the fore. Yet, amid growing criticism of modernity, discussions have emerged concerning postmodern society, a concept on which sociologists remain divided. Defining and naming the new society thus presents a persistent problem in the field of social sciences. The period generally regarded as postmodern is viewed by some sociologists as a new era and by others as a continuation of modern society. This study aimed to render the postmodern period more comprehensible by assembling the metaphors that sociologists have conceptualized and used to express social reality.

Keywords: Sociology, sociology of religion, postmodernity, sociologists, metaphor

ÖZ

İçinde yaşadıkları toplumsal gerçekliği ve bu gerçeklikte meydana gelen değişimleri anlama ve açıklama çabasıyla hareket eden sosyologlar, konuya çeşitli kavramsallaştırmalar ve tipolojiler ışığında yaklaşmışlar ve sosyal bilimler alanına önemli katkılar sağlamışlardır. Bu bağlamda toplumların tecrübe ettiği değişim ve dönüşümleri açıklamak için geleneksel ve modern toplum ayrımı kullanılırken, son zamanlarda bunun yerini modern ve postmodern ayrımına dayalı tipolojinin aldığı görülmektedir. Ancak bu hususta modernite üzerindeki eleştirilerin artması karşısında sosyologların üzerinde hemfikir olamadığı modern sonrası toplumla ilgili tartışmalar başlamıştır. Yeni toplumu tanımlama ve adlandırma da sosyal bilimler alanında başlı başına bir problem olarak kendini göstermektedir. Genel anlamda postmodern olarak kabul gören dönem, bazı sosyologlar tarafından yeni bir dönem, bazıları tarafından ise modern toplumun devamı şeklinde düşünülmektedir. Öncelikle modern ve postmodern kavramıyla ilgili açıklamalardan sonra özellikle post-moderniteyi açıklamak üzere dolaşıma giren bazı metaforik yaklaşımlara değinecek olan bu makalede amaç, toplumsal gerçekliği ifade etmek için sosyologlar tarafından kavramsallaştırılan ve kullanılan metaforları bir araya getirerek postmodern dönemi daha anlaşılır kılmaktır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Sosyoloji, din sosyolojisi, postmodernite, sosyologlar, metafor



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Received/Geliş Tarihi: 26.04.2024

Accepted/Kabul Tarihi: 08.12.2025

Publication Date/Yayınlanma Tarihi: 26.12.2025

To cite this article/Atıf: Darende, Ö. F. & Kirman, M. A. (2025). Metaphorical approaches to postmodernity. *Trakya University Journal of Social Sciences*, 27(2), 286–296.



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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Sociologists use various frameworks and metaphors to analyse social reality, offering insight into the structures and processes that shape societies. Their focus has moved from the traditional-versus-modern paradigm of the 19th and 20th centuries to the newer modern-versus-postmodern distinction. This shift reflects both the growing complexity of sociological thought and critiques of modernity rooted in Enlightenment ideals such as rationality, progress, and scientific objectivity. Associated with industrialization and bureaucratization, modernity came under scrutiny after world wars and persistent inequalities. Consequently, the term “postmodern” emerged as both a critical stance and a description of new social forms.

Despite widespread usage, “postmodernity” remains contested and ambiguous. Some sociologists see it as a clear break from modernity marked by fragmentation and hyperreality; others regard it as an intensification of modern trends, often labelled “late” or “high” modernity. This lack of agreement sustains ongoing debate in the discipline.

This article aims to explore how sociologists conceptualize the move from modern to postmodern society. Rather than resolve the debate, it seeks to clarify the postmodern period through the metaphors central to sociological thinking. By presenting the metaphors employed to describe postmodern social reality, the study offers a synthesised overview of diverse theoretical approaches and their imaginative vocabularies.

The article first recalls key traits of modern society: emphasis on reason and science, the centrality of the nation-state, belief in linear progress, and reliance on institutions such as family, education, and religion for social order. Modern society appears structured, hierarchical, and predictable, governed by rules and rational planning. Postmodern society, by contrast, is depicted as fluid and decentralised, with blurred boundaries between cultures, identities, and realities, characterized by information overload, consumer culture of consumption, mass-media dominance, and the primacy of simulation over substance. Thinkers such as Baudrillard, Bauman, and Giddens provide interrelated yet distinct interpretations, each anchored in vivid metaphors.

The article analyzes various metaphors. Baudrillard’s “hyperreality” (Baudrillard, 2024) illustrates how signs can surpass reality, highlighting the media’s influence on experience. Giddens describes modernity as a “juggernaut” (Giddens, 1996), conveying the relentless momentum of social change that continues into the postmodern era. Bauman’s “liquid modernity” (Bauman, 2006) expresses ongoing flux, uncertainty, and the weakening of stable identities and relationships. The article also examines other metaphors, including the “network society” (Castells, 1996), which emphasises decentralised, digitally connected social organisation in the information age; the “risk society” (Beck, 1992), focused on managing manufactured risks in late modernity; and the “society of spectacle” (Debord, 2021), which underscores the visual and performative dimensions of postmodern life. Each metaphor offers a distinct perspective on the complexities of contemporary society.

This article reflects on the implications of metaphorical thinking in sociology. Although not precise analytical tools, metaphors are essential for capturing emergent phenomena and fostering theoretical innovation. They help sociologists transcend rigid classifications and connect with lived realities in a rapidly changing world. Consequently, metaphors shape the understanding of social life. The study argues that grasping the postmodern period requires openness to multiple perspectives and recognition of metaphor as a key heuristic and narrative device. By integrating diverse frameworks, sociologists can produce nuanced accounts of ongoing transformations.

This study employs qualitative research methodology. It aims to reveal how postmodernity is represented metaphorically in different contexts. Metaphors in postmodern discourse have been examined within their social and cultural settings, and the research design has been shaped accordingly.

The research addresses these questions: Through which metaphors is postmodernity represented? Which metaphors are prominent from a sociological perspective? How is the use of metaphors related to core features of postmodern thought?

Data were collected through document analysis of academic articles, book chapters, novels, essays, art criticism, and popular culture products. Special attention was given to texts by Lyotard, Baudrillard, Derrida, and Foucault to identify metaphorical uses of concepts. The metaphors were examined at lexical and contextual levels.

Metaphor and thematic analyses were employed. Using cognitive metaphor theory, conceptual metaphors were identified and classified. Their deeper meanings were interpreted hermeneutically. The metaphors were grouped thematically, for example, “labyrinth,” “mirror,” “collage,” “simulation,” “game,” and “superficiality.”

Introduction

Social scientists explain social reality through comparisons and typologies, frequently employing metaphors and analogies that require careful examination. This approach has produced diverse perspectives, particularly on large-scale societal processes such as social change, modernization, and secularization. The transformations following the Industrial Revolution prompted extensive sociological analyses, yielding new theoretical insights. Central factors include the dominance of rationality, scientific advancement, and the rapid diffusion of technology, industrialization, and urbanization. These developments have profoundly altered social and cultural patterns, shifting societies from traditional to modern forms, a core process termed modernization.

Modernity is a meta-narrative defined by universality, rationality, certainty, change, progress, and prosperity. The incomplete realization of these ideals and the emergence of dysfunctional elements have led social scientists to identify a subsequent era marked by locality, irrationality, relativism, specialization, and ambiguity (Emer, 2024). This era, commonly termed postmodern, is interpreted variously: as a new epoch, an extension of modernity, or a distinct condition. Scholars who stress continuity describe modernity as an “unfinished project” (Habermas, 1981), characterizing the current phase as incomplete modernization.

Sociology seeks to understand societies and the interactions between individuals and social structures. It applies various research methods and theories to elucidate societal functioning, individual behavior in social contexts, and mechanisms of social change. Metaphors are essential in this endeavour, clarifying abstract concepts and enhancing comprehension of sociological theories. A metaphor enables the conceptualization of one phenomenon through another, thereby simplifying complex ideas. In sociology, metaphors serve as linguistic and cognitive tools for understanding social structures and dynamics, and postmodern and structuralist sociologists particularly value them in analysing social phenomena (Fuhse, 2022).

Metaphors improve understanding of sociological theories and complex social processes by offering fresh perspectives. Many sociological concepts, such as “social structure,” “power relations,” and “identity,” are abstract and not directly observable. Metaphorical language makes them more tangible; for example, “social structure” may be represented as a network with individuals and groups as nodes connected by ties (Swedberg, 2020).

Metaphors offer diverse frameworks for understanding social phenomena, enabling sociologists to examine events from new angles and open fresh research directions. For example, the

metaphor “society as a machine” stresses functional aspects of social order, while “society as an organism” conveys a dynamic view of social structure (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2022). Using metaphors to analyse social structures deepens comprehension of both phenomena and dynamics. In Max Weber’s theory of social action, actions constitute meaningful structures, and the metaphors employed strengthen sociological analysis (Hasselmann, 2023).

Societies display complex characteristics, and metaphors are essential for understanding these structures. The “jigsaw puzzle” metaphor (Siahaan & Siahaya, 2023) presents society as dynamic, made up of shifting and incomplete pieces, thereby emphasising its adaptive quality. Heraclitus’s statement “no man ever steps in the same river twice” similarly underlines the continuous and directionless nature of social change, revealing constant transformation in social dynamics.

Scholarship confirms that metaphors and theories substantially shape debates on modernity and postmodernity. This study examines the metaphors and analogies used to explain postmodernity within modernity–postmodernity discussions in the social sciences. It seeks to explore varied interpretations of postmodernity through metaphor rather than provide a final definition.

Modern and Postmodern

The term “modern” appeared in the late fifth century among Atlantic coastal communities in Europe, initially separating the Christian present from pagan and Roman influences. Although originally religious, its meaning gradually expanded. By the seventeenth century, modernity denoted new forms of social life and organisation that spread across much of the world. Today it is associated with Western societies, regarded since the eighteenth century as the main expression of modernity. Ultimately, “modern” signifies a conscious break with antiquity and a shift from the old to the new.

Modernity is commonly viewed as a departure from traditional traits, marked by secularization in which religion loses significance at multiple levels. This shift, whereby individuals abandon religious beliefs for modern alternatives or none, has triggered a widespread crisis of meaning (Kirman, 2005). This view, however, faces critique. In *Critique of Modernity*, Alain Touraine argues that modernity represents a rupture in relations among humans, society, and nature, dismissing the idea of a simple passage from the sacred to the rational as “simplistic evolutionism” (Touraine, 2018).

Modernity is associated with the technical, intellectual, and cultural achievements of industrialized Western societies and is often equated with progress. By contrast, the pre-modern, linked to order and stability, is frequently viewed negatively

(Macionis, 2022). Although modernity brings conveniences, it also creates problems such as environmental degradation, exploitation, threats of war, spiritual emptiness, and declining moral values. These outcomes have generated skepticism about whether modernity truly improves quality of life (Kirman, 2016). Consequently, concepts such as “alternative modernities,” “non-Western modernities,” and “multiple modernities” have attracted growing interest (Eisenstadt, 2000).

Postmodernism emerged in North American architecture in the 1960s and spread during the 1980s and 1990s to culture, politics, economics, and sociology. Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1984) represents a key statement, strongly shaped by Michel Foucault's discourse analysis (which situates language in its social, political, and historical context) and archaeological–genealogical method (which reveals that phenomena taken as natural or inevitable, including madness, crime, sexuality, are historically contingent products) (Foucault, 2002). Postmodern discourse contests essentialism, universal truths, authority, and hierarchy, while promoting pluralism, relativism, freedom, locality, and attention to everyday life. The term “postmodern” includes meanings such as “after modernism” and “late capitalism,” marking a rupture with the Enlightenment's modern outlook (Kirman, 2016). This rupture arises from rapid global changes that disrupt traditional lifestyles without fully replacing them, producing the “crisis of modernity” and prompting new intellectual and cultural developments.

Postmodernity gained prominence in the mid-twentieth century as a critique of modernism that offers an alternative paradigm and signals a new epoch. Lyotard defines the postmodern condition by incredulity toward “grand narratives” (Lyotard, 1984). He argues that Enlightenment ideals such as liberty and justice have lost legitimacy, thus advocating resistance to totality and celebration of difference.

Sociologically, Ahmed (1992) holds that understanding postmodernity requires critical reassessment of the modernist project. Postmodernity rejects a unified worldview claiming definitive solutions and favours pluralism. Its central feature is recognition of diverse cultures, ideologies, and lifestyles that cannot be ranked because universal validity criteria no longer exist. This produces uncertainty between reality and representation, expressed as “all that is solid melts into air” (Berman, 1988). Pluralism and relativism thereby replace modernity's binary logic with a postmodern “both/and” approach.

With the rise of information technologies and computers, postmodern society is often described as the media age, where communication networks shape preferences. Media produce countless performative images, yielding multiple realities and

unstable, shifting identities. Hybrid identities such as African–American or German–Turkish have become common. The ambiguous character of postmodernism hinders clear definition and has prompted terms like late modernity and second modernity. Bauman (2006) defines postmodernity as modernity aware of its own limits, undertaking self-critique and pursuing transformation.

If modernity seeks to explain every socio-cultural phenomenon along a tradition–modernity axis and thus binds culture to progress, postmodernity severs that link (Touraine, 2018).

Common Metaphors Related to Postmodernity

Preliminary research shows that sociologists have produced numerous metaphorical representations of postmodernity. For clarity and analytical precision, this study adopts a selective focus. The metaphors are grouped into two main categories: “Postmodernity as a Continuation of Modernity” and “Postmodernity as a New Era”. These are examined under the subheadings “Loss of Reality and Uncertainty,” “Society of Spectacle and Surveillance,” and “Incongruous Juxtapositions.”

Postmodernity as a Continuation of Modernity

Some social scientists treat postmodernity not as a separate period but as a continuation or later stage of modernity. The metaphors supporting this position are discussed below.

An Unfinished Project

Habermas's (1980) speech “Modernity: An Unfinished Project,” delivered on receiving the Adorno Prize, remains central to the modernity–postmodernity debate. Acknowledging signs of ageing in modernity, he rejects its wholesale rejection in favour of a wholly new era. He argues that postmodernism, now prevalent in intellectual circles, encourages a new conservatism. He questions whether modernity is truly exhausted or postmodernity merely apparent, noting that it inherits trends from cultural modernity since the mid-nineteenth century. He concludes that cultural modernity is still in its early phase.

Habermas equates modernity with the Enlightenment project and insists it remains ongoing. He views postmodernism as a threat to that project (Kellner, 1988). Perry Anderson regards Habermas's critique as the main force discrediting postmodern thought since the late 1970s, supplying the counterbalance new intellectual currents demand.

Radicalized Modernity

Giddens (1996) critically examines the idea that postmodernism diverts individuals or societies from modernity toward a new social order. He uses the term “radicalised modernity” to define the relationship between postmodernism and modernity. Giddens believes modernity remains crucial for addressing

key sociological problems. He argues that recent changes do not justify simply creating new concepts like postmodernism; instead, sociological analysis should focus on understanding modernity itself, which has not yet been fully grasped. Giddens posits that, rather than entering a postmodern phase, the world is moving into an era where modernity's consequences are becoming increasingly radicalized and globalized.

For Giddens, the postmodern condition signifies not the end of modernity but its self-understanding. Developments of the postmodern era do not lead us "beyond modernity" but enhance our understanding of its reflexivity. He argues that modernity persists, shedding remnants of traditional thought, and is most notably undergoing a radicalization process.

Second Modernity

German sociologist Ulrich Beck introduced the concept of "second modernity" in 1986 to understand the transformations in modernization and social change. This term refers to late modernity, which transcends earlier phases, also known as "reflexive modernization" (Beck, 1992). It embodies "the modern critique of modernity" and signifies the "modernization of modern society" (Beck et al., 2003). Beck argues that modernity, which dismantled feudal structures to create industrial society, has now deconstructed that society, leading to a new or second modernity (Beck, 1992), further developed with Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash (Beck et al., 1994).

The concept of reflexive modernity relates to the formation of a risk society and increasing individualisation, positioning itself as a critique of postmodernism. Beck rejects the idea of surpassing modernity, asserting instead that we are in a "second modernity." This new stage sees the decline of industrial society, replaced by a risk society where greater awareness, deliberate decision-making, and varied choices are required. Second modernity reflects globalizing institutions and the liberation of daily life from traditional controls. Beck highlights the transition from hidden risks in industrial society to the recognition and management of risks in advanced modernity. While postmodernists see complexity as uncertainty, Beck views reflexive modernization as requiring intervention in social life, opposing the "end of history" thesis as absurd.

Loss of Reality and Uncertainty

The postmodern condition signifies a loss of reality that undermines the stability and certainty of truth. This era stands in sharp contrast to the modern period through its re-evaluation of time and history. Postmodern discourse displays an anxiety over this lost reality while still attempting to preserve a modern perspective. Descartes' search for absolute truth falters under postmodern critique. Consequently, the idea of absolute truth dissipates, giving way to a subjective, fragmented reality in

which competing narratives gain equal legitimacy. What does society become when reality is relative? How does an individual cope with a reality devoid of firm foundations?

These questions concern the collapse of reality and its historically shifting perception across disciplines. They invite examination of postmodernity's consequences for understanding reality. Media and technology profoundly shape this perception. On one hand, perception alters reality, turning lived experience into construct; on the other, media render reality virtual and fictional. Simulacra do not merely copy reality but actively mould perception (Baudrillard, 2024). This analysis of reality's loss, tied to modern identity, critically assesses the postmodern condition within simulacra and hyperreality.

Liquid Modernity

Bauman (2006) distinguishes two periods of modernity: "solid" and "liquid." Solid modernity resembles birds in a cage, symbolising mutual engagement and binding agreements. Liquid modernity, by contrast, is when one bird escapes the cage, representing freedom and fluidity in human relations, marked by the absence of lasting constraints. This era is likened to "a journey on a plane with an empty cockpit," characterized by uncertainty and lack of clear authority or ideology, making governance elusive. Power flows freely and is no longer easily contained, highlighting the difficulty of navigating a world where rules and structures are increasingly ambiguous.

In liquid modernity, Bauman stresses the pivotal role of social media in shaping relationships. These platforms remove the need for physical closeness, enabling virtual connections that offer a sense of community. Yet this ease also creates fragmented communities and weak ties that remain fragile. Transient connections overshadow lasting bonds, thereby increasing human isolation. Individuals favour short-term choices over long-term commitments in various social relationships, avoiding associated responsibilities. This produces a paradox where individualism conflicts with communal bonds in liquid modernity.

Network

Postmodernity views social structures and relationships as dynamic and interconnected. The network metaphor illustrates that social ties are now shaped by flexible connections rather than rigid hierarchies. Unlike the industrial frameworks of modern society, postmodern society emphasises temporary links among individuals and groups. These network structures show how physical relationships, information, and culture influence one another and indicate that social structures are constantly transforming. They are also essential for communication, power, and knowledge production, suggesting that social change occurs in a decentralised, nonhierarchical way (Castells & Cardoso, 2005).

Hyperreality

Baudrillard's (2012) concept of hyperreality serves as a metaphor for contemporary social structures and media influence. Hyperreality describes a state where boundaries between reality and simulations blur, with reality reproduced through media, advertisements, and virtual environments. Baudrillard argues that media decisively shape perceptions, making them immediate and dominant. This metaphor indicates that social reality is formed through simulations and representations that often supplant actual reality. It underscores the fragmentation of traditional notions of "reality" in postmodernity and shows how media narratives reconstruct social reality.

Rhizome

The rhizome metaphor, developed by Deleuze and Guattari (2005), is key to understanding postmodern social structures. A rhizome, unlike a tree with a dominant root and hierarchy, spreads horizontally without centre or fixed order. This concept depicts social organisation and knowledge production as decentralised and interconnected, opposing linear progression. Social change emerges from multiple paths and interactions rather than a predetermined course. The rhizome metaphor highlights that knowledge, social relations, and power operate flexibly and multidirectionally, resembling a network.

Kaleidoscope

The kaleidoscope metaphor captures the dynamic and multifaceted character of identity. It portrays identity as nonstatic, continually evolving in response to changing social contexts. Identities are repeatedly redefined according to societal conditions. Each individual's identity consists of a multidimensional structure of binaries, and postmodern theory holds that these identities frequently incorporate contradictory and opposing elements (Hackett, 2019).

Tumultuous Sea

This metaphor underlines that social change is both continuous and unpredictable. Social structures resemble the vast, restless waves of the ocean, remaining in perpetual motion and transformation. Each wave represents a shift, and every transformation signals a moment of crisis. The analogy indicates that social order is neither secure nor stable but exists in ongoing uncertainty and evolution. It challenges traditional sociological approaches and highlights the need for more flexible frameworks capable of reflecting the fluid character of social conditions in a postmodern context (Cocozza, 2020).

Mirror Metaphor

The mirror metaphor is widely employed to elucidate postmodernity. The mirror symbolises the intricate relationship between reality and its reflection, encapsulating the difficulties

of perceiving reality in the postmodern world. It represents individuals' attempts to comprehend their own identities and surrounding social structures. Extensively analysed in sociological studies of postmodernity, the mirror metaphor effectively illustrates how individuals and societies engage in self-reflection amid a fragmented and complex reality. Overall, examining such metaphors reveals the multidimensional nature of postmodernity and its influence on sociological inquiry, prompting scholars to consider the interplay between reflection and representation in contemporary society (Schreiner & Lyddon, 2002).

Simulation Metaphor

The simulation metaphor blurs boundaries between reality and fiction, aligning with Baudrillard's theory of simulation and its transformed understanding of reality in postmodernity. It emphasises how media and visual culture construct social experiences that depart from the real. This disconnection poses fundamental questions and challenges established sociological paradigms for interpreting interaction within these new dynamics (Baudrillard, 2024).

The metaphor embodies a postmodern perspective that questions the stability of individual experiences and social structures. Postmodernity compels reassessment of identities and roles, while the simulation metaphor demonstrates the construction and reinterpretation of these elements, revealing how distinctions between reality and fiction shape identities. By concentrating on interactions within social frameworks, it underscores their decisive role in identity formation (Baudrillard, 2024).

A New Era: The Postmodern Age

When treated as a distinct era separate from modernity, postmodernity is described through numerous concepts and metaphors advanced by social scientists. These metaphors typically evoke themes of uncertainty, instability, ambiguity, fluidity, the rejection of centrality, especially European centrism, locality, and related ideas. Several of the metaphors employed under this heading have been discussed above.

The End of Meta-Narratives

The most influential concept in defining postmodernity as a distinct era is Jean-François Lyotard's metaphor of the "end of meta-narratives," which represents the most complete rejection of modernity.

Lyotard employed the term "postmodern" to examine the transformation of knowledge in advanced societies after the 1950s. He argued that post-industrial societies experienced a crisis of meta-narratives, the grand, overarching stories of understanding, because scientific and technological advances

repeatedly undermined reason itself and revealed the conflict between science and narrative.

Whereas modernism rested on the pursuit of absolute, certain truth, in the postmodern era it is no longer possible to sustain belief in a single, absolute truth, a grand reason, a universal way of life, or a linear conception of history that presents progress as a singular, universal direction. A new conceptualization is therefore required.

For Lyotard, the postmodern condition reflects changes in both material and intellectual spheres, expressed as skepticism toward modernism. This has produced a legitimacy crisis for modernism. In post-industrial societies, faith in grand meta-narratives has been replaced by deep doubt, invalidating many previously accepted explanations. Consequently, concepts tied to meta-narratives, including enlightenment, rationality, idealism, progress, freedom, and universality, are now questioned or rejected. Lyotard thus characterizes the postmodern as an era of incredulity toward meta-narratives, with the total rejection of modernity constituting the foundation of postmodernism (Lyotard, 1984).

The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism

Jameson (1991), a key postmodernist figure, describes postmodernism as the “cultural logic of late capitalism” and the “third phase of capitalism”. He sees historical changes as driven by capital accumulation and technological progress, noting that postmodernism began in the 1950s with the rise of diverse consumer goods and new technologies.

Jameson analyses cultural changes such as postmodernism as reflections of the “deep logic” of the capitalist system. He uses a periodical typology based on the assumption that social reality is shaped by economic forces. There are three phases in capitalism: market capitalism (realism), monopoly capitalism (modernism), and multinational capitalism (postmodernism).

Jameson identifies international capital, technological progress, and the political erosion of the nation-state as key factors in advanced capitalism’s development. Influenced by Mandel’s Late Capitalism, he describes the post-World War II era as a phase of multinational capitalism, marking a “purer” stage than earlier ones. Companies seeking higher profits now operate internationally, prompting corresponding cultural changes and reflections.

The Society of Spectacle and Surveillance

The concepts of the society of spectacle and surveillance emphasise media, technology, and power’s impact on individual experiences and identities, offering a critical view of contemporary social dynamics. Influenced by Guy Debord’s

“society of spectacle” (Debord, 2021), this framework shows that social interactions become images, with reality consumed through mass media and entertainment. Consequently, individuals move from active participants to passive consumers of images.

The proliferation of surveillance technologies adds a layer of monitoring where behaviors are regulated by institutional and self-surveillance practices. This intersection of spectacle and surveillance establishes a framework centred on visibility and performance. Power is exerted through direct observation and the internalisation of surveillance, normalising conformity and obedience. These dynamics shape social norms, identities, and hierarchies, while fostering alienation and disempowerment among individuals (Foucault, 2019).

The Society of Spectacle

In the postmodern era, media influence intensifies to the point that everything is transformed into a commodified spectacle. Guy Debord, in *The Society of the Spectacle* (Debord, 2021), contends that the spectacle operates as a consumable product that dominates all aspects of life, extending even to mafia activities, terrorism, and religion, whose promises of salvation have become superficial commodities. The world is converted into a stage on which everyone simultaneously performs and watches, and continuity is crucial: anything absent from the spectacle for a few days is treated as though it never existed. This society destroys historical knowledge, conceals censorship behind an appearance of novelty, and intertwines terrorism with spectacle, rendering truth indistinguishable from falsehood and erasing subjectivity. The spectacle penetrates time, space, urbanism, tourism, and cultural consumption, making escape impossible.

The Panopticon Metaphor

The Panopticon is a surveillance and control mechanism designed by Bentham (2016). It consists of a circular structure with a central observation tower and surrounding cells. In this system, occupants cannot see the observer but remain aware of the possibility of constant monitoring. Consequently, disciplinary mechanisms are activated through self-regulation. The Panopticon has been applied in various contexts and regarded as an effective means of maintaining social order.

Foucault (1980) transformed Bentham’s eighteenth-century prison design into a central metaphor for postmodernity. In this arrangement, a single observer can monitor all prisoners while remaining invisible to them, creating a permanent state of potential surveillance that induces automatic self-discipline. Foucault employed the Panopticon to analyse power relations in contemporary society, demonstrating that power functions not only through direct coercion but also through the internalisation

of surveillance by individuals. Within this framework, subjects regulate their own behavior in the absence of visible authority. The Panopticon thus reveals how power relations subtly structure the fabric of modern society (Kellner, 2024).

The Synopticon Metaphor

The Synopticon constitutes a surveillance structure derived from the Panopticon mechanism, yet it reverses the dynamic: the many observe the few, while simultaneously the few observe the many (Mathiesen, 1997). In this arrangement, observers control one another through mutual observation, and the observed likewise monitor the observers. The Synopticon exerts considerable influence in the social and cultural spheres by reinforcing constant surveillance among individuals, thereby contributing to the preservation of social norms.

In contrast to the Panopticon, the Synopticon establishes a reciprocal relationship of observation and monitoring between observers and observed, producing a symmetrical pattern of surveillance. Within this structure, every individual simultaneously occupies the positions of observer and observed, resulting in a society characterized by perpetual mutual monitoring.

The Omnipicon Metaphor

The Omnipicon denotes the transformation of surveillance and monitoring in the postmodern era (Sprague, 2007). This concept extends beyond the classical Panopticon and Synopticon, resting fundamentally on the capacity to observe individuals on a comprehensive scale. With the advancement of modern technologies and communication tools, the Omnipicon intensifies and expands; its analysis seeks to comprehend and assess the surveillance mechanisms characteristic of postmodern society.

The Omnipicon encompasses not only surveillance and monitoring but also omnipresence and constant access to information. Its operation relies on the continuous observation and recording of individuals. Consequently, the Omnipicon plays a prominent role in shaping individual behavior and sustaining social order. Ubiquity and perpetual accessibility underscore the influence of technology and communication tools on individuals in contemporary society.

Incompatible Alliances

In the postmodern era, metaphors serve as essential instruments for interpreting social reality. A defining feature of postmodernism is its rejection of the notion that truth and meaning originate from a single source. Accordingly, metaphors that do not belong to the previous two categories are examined under the heading “incompatible alliances” (heterogeneity, coexistence of contradictions, multiple, nonfixed, and flexible

identities) (Hall, 1990) in order to describe social structures and relationships arising from the convergence of diverse cultural, social, and individual elements.

In postmodern society, the homogeneous structures and uniformity of earlier periods have given way to ongoing change and diversification, permitting contradictory and heterogeneous elements to coexist. These alliances highlight the intersection of social identities, values, and norms, and are linked to individuals possessing multiple, fluid, and flexible identities within social structures.

Under the impact of postmodernism, such incompatible alliances appear not only in cultural domains but also at social, political, and economic levels. This development renders the social structure markedly more heterogeneous and complex than in preceding eras. The metaphors in this group therefore designate the contradictory and multilayered character of social dynamics, identities, and relationships in the postmodern period.

The “Pick and Mix” Society

Postmodernists maintain that contemporary society can be described as a “pick and mix” society. This notion rests on the principle of combining dissimilar elements, often those that appear incompatible. The metaphor derives from the practice of selecting assorted sweets in a shop. Individuals now freely choose their lifestyles and orientations from a wider array of options than in previous periods, analogous to selecting goods in a supermarket, as reflected in rational choice theory (Kirman, 2013). Such configurations present an eclectic character, resembling a “patchwork” (Kirman, 2010) that incorporates elements from diverse religious traditions. In this context, one may observe atheist adherents who reject religious belief yet readily employ religious symbols.

Postmodernists contend that in this emerging social order, where individuals from varied nations, cultures, and religions interact, judgements based on class, gender, or ethnicity have diminished. Birth into the working class, female gender, or black ethnicity no longer predetermines a person’s life trajectory or future to the degree formerly assumed, nor does it shape consciousness and identity as extensively as classical sociologists often emphasised in the modern era.

Mosaic

Postmodernism holds that identities are not anchored to a fixed foundational structure but are shaped by multiple, provisional, and fragmented identities that coexist and intersect. Just as a mosaic creates a coherent whole from diverse stones, postmodern identity emerges from the convergence of varied experiences, cultural encounters, and social conditions. This

mosaic analogy views individual identity not as a singular, immutable essence but as an assemblage of heterogeneous, multifaceted, and transient elements. Identity, therefore, is not static; it continually evolves, transforms, and redefines itself in response to shifting circumstances. The conception of identities in such fragmented and multidimensional terms constitutes a core feature of postmodern thought (Flax, 2023).

Jigsaw Puzzle

The jigsaw puzzle metaphor in postmodern sociology refers to an approach that examines social structures not as a unified whole but through their separate components. Each individual, culture, or social group constitutes a distinct piece of the puzzle. These pieces, however, are never fully integrated; each retains its own significance and value. The metaphor conveys the impossibility of completely deciphering or finalising social structure. Although certain pieces may connect, the overall picture of social dynamics remains fragmented and elusive, thereby highlighting the complex character of social interactions and underscoring the subjective nature of reality within a postmodern framework (Siahaan & Siahaya, 2023).

Supermarket Metaphor

The supermarket metaphor represents the organisation of postmodern society as an environment characterized by a vast range of options and grounded in the principle of consumption. It depicts an environment in which the proliferation of choices available to individuals reinforces a consumption-oriented culture. The metaphor illustrates the potentially overwhelming character of consumer society, where the abundance of options can complicate decision-making processes. As individuals attempt to navigate seemingly endless choices, this surplus may produce decision paralysis, generate consumption-related anxiety, and lead to withdrawal from meaningful socio-cultural engagement. This situation highlights the need for sociologists to reassess traditional research methodologies and adopt more sophisticated frameworks that capture the intricacies of postmodern existence (Berger, 2022).

The supermarket metaphor also aids analysis of individual consumption habits and the formation of social identities, helping to illuminate individuals' social interactions and their effects on broader societal structures. Consumption behavior not only shapes personal identities but also produces new distinctions among social classes. In this regard, the supermarket metaphor serves as a valuable tool for understanding the impact of consumer culture on individuals. By redefining both individual identities and social relationships, consumer culture positions the supermarket metaphor as a key concept for explaining these transformative processes (Brownsmith, 2020).

Conclusion

Social scientists, seeking to explain the intricate and multifaceted nature of social reality, have frequently employed comparisons, metaphors, and figurative language to address this complex task with greater depth and nuance. The present article has thoroughly examined a range of metaphors and figurative expressions advanced specifically to illuminate the concept of postmodernity within the broader modernity-versus-postmodernity debate in the social sciences. Alongside the metaphors discussed, certain approaches interpret the postmodern period as a direct extension or continuation of modernity, stressing that the modernization process has not ceased but continues to evolve and renew itself in varied forms. Additionally, interpretations that foreground the emergence of "incompatible alliances" and their contribution to understanding postmodern societal dynamics have also been evaluated. These metaphors, proposed to grasp the complexities of the postmodern era, draw attention to critical dimensions of the phenomenon and thus make substantial contributions to sociology and the social sciences more broadly, enriching our comprehension of contemporary social dynamics.

The examination of metaphorical frameworks within postmodernity reveals both the flexibility of meaning and the profound implications these metaphors hold for our understanding of contemporary society and culture. This flexibility challenges traditional conceptions of identity and reality, prompting a reassessment of how narratives are constructed in a fragmented landscape. Moreover, the metaphors employed not only shape our understanding of postmodernity but also influence interactions within the diverse cultural domains that characterize contemporary global society. This continual interplay emphasises the importance of recognising how conceptual frameworks can either bridge or deepen cultural divisions, thereby influencing the collective narrative in an era defined by postmodern perspectives.

Postmodernism has introduced a range of innovative and transformative perspectives into sociology, substantially deepening comprehension of the dynamic, multifaceted, and constantly evolving character of social structures. These distinctive insights have encouraged a critical re-evaluation of established views on societal formations. Postmodern metaphors serve as powerful analytical tools that render complex ideas more tangible and accessible. Metaphors such as the network, kaleidoscope, puzzle, and turbulent sea provide imaginative frameworks through which social structures, identities, and power relations can be examined with greater flexibility, fluidity, and contextual depth. The significance of postmodern metaphors in sociological analysis lies not only in

their ability to enrich understanding of the social world but also in their requirement that analysis remain balanced, illuminating both the emancipatory and the transformative dimensions of social change within an ever-shifting societal landscape.

The metaphorical frameworks associated with postmodernity disrupt conventional narratives and necessitate a thorough re-evaluation of the complexities present in contemporary society. This perspective highlights the instability of meaning in postmodern discourse and stresses the value of embracing multiple interpretations. As we navigate a terrain marked by fragmentation and contradiction, these metaphorical models encourage reflection on the interconnections among culture, identity, and power, ultimately fostering deeper insight into shared human experience. Such insight reveals the intricately layered character of postmodernity and underlines the need for innovative interpretive approaches capable of accommodating the fluidity of present-day existence.

In conclusion, the nature and characteristics of postmodern society remain a central and highly contested subject in sociology. The transition from modern frameworks to postmodern paradigms has not only disrupted traditional distinctions between societal types but has also generated diverse interpretations of ongoing social transformations. Whereas some sociologists regard postmodernism as a radical break with modernity, others view it as a continuation or intensification of existing modern dynamics. The use of metaphors to articulate these shifts has proved especially valuable, providing sophisticated instruments for apprehending the complexities and uncertainties that define the postmodern condition. Such metaphors function as indispensable tools for understanding an era marked by fragmentation, fluidity, and pervasive ambiguity in matters of identity, culture, and power. Through close analysis of these metaphors, this article advances a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the social changes occurring in the postmodern period while highlighting the enduring difficulties scholars face in defining and interpreting emerging social realities.

Ethical Statement

It is hereby declared that all rules specified in the *Higher Education Institutions Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Directive* were followed in this study.

Ethics Committee Approval

Since this study did not require ethics committee approval, no ethics approval was obtained.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare that they have no competing interests.

Funding

No financial support was received for this research.

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