

Summaries

Nico Wilterdink

In These Confusing Times
A Cultural Sociology of Postmodernism

The article explores postmodernism as a multi-faceted cultural movement in which the label of 'postmodern' acquired various overlapping meanings. Postmodernism is interpreted as the work of intellectuals (in the broad sense) in different relatively autonomous cultural fields. Its emergence and spread is explained as resulting from four interrelated but distinctive processes: 1) changes in the arts, literature and architecture, 2) political and ideological changes (in particular, Marxism's loss of intellectual appeal since the 1970s), 3) the emergence of new 'identity movements', and 4) changing competitive relations within and between scholarly and scientific fields. These processes are related to broader social transformations - among them, processes of 'individualization', the commercialization of leisure, the growing impact of the mass media - which might be regarded as indicative of the transition to a 'postmodern' society.

Carlo van Praag

Dutch Multicultural Society
Balancing between Empty-handedness and Selfdenial

Multiculturalists, in the Netherlands, and in other western societies, claim that the increasing ethnic diversity within their countries is not adequately reflected in the way society is organized. Multiculturalism is widely adhered to among Dutch intellectuals and policy makers and the latter are eager to admit that they have been negligent in creating a society which does justice to the principle. However, when it comes to putting the principle into practice they tend to remain vague. To what extent may non-western cultures in a western society take possession of public life? To what extent may ethnic communities exert self-governance? In what way does a multicultural society differ from the one we know? These questions deserve intelligent answers. Clearly policy makers are not keen on any major adjustments in the spheres of justice and public morality.

Compassion and Cruelty in Modern Society
The Case of the Holocaust

This article explores the possibility of a sociology of the Holocaust. Attempts have been made, especially by Daniel Goldhagen and Zygmunt Bauman, but have not been followed up. The article focusses on compassion. The idea that the sight of suffering imposes a duty to ameliorate it seems a very old notion but is in fact a very recent one. The duty that once bound saints, is now considered incumbent on all reasonable people. Yet ideas and feelings changed over time. Before the nineteenth century suffering was hardly considered an evil, in fact guardians of morality paraded the spectacular suffering of evil-doers before the public as a means of improvement.

I define compassion as the organized campaign to lessen the suffering of strangers as a distinctly modern form of morality. It played an historically important role in the rise of modern society, and it continues to be important today. A better understanding of the nature of compassion and its connection to social structure, allows us to explain many social movements today, movements that otherwise seem accidental, unprecedented and post-modern.

The biggest threat to this view of compassion is the Holocaust, which can also be seen as the breakdown of compassion. The Nazi attempt to destroy European Jewry will serve as the limit case for the argument that modernity fosters the growth of compassion. Is it possible to consider the Holocaust as a German historical phenomenon, not as the result of the production of moral indifference, but just the opposite, the production of closeness which allowed for exceptional cruelty? The article examines this problem in the light of Elias' theories (especially his views on the tensions between a bourgeois merchant ethic and an aristocratic warrior ethic in Germany), moreover, by means of Goldhagen's study on the Holocaust the article shows that the breakdown of compassion should not be equated to indifference.

Giselinde Kuipers

Humor styles in the Netherlands

People have different humor styles: different notions of what is good, funny, or bad, *un-funny* humor. This article explores Dutch humor styles, using survey data and interview material. The survey resulted in an unexpectedly simple pattern of four humor styles, related to age and level of education. The distinction between old and young respondents is related to different notions of crudeness. The educational difference relates to style rather than content. We traced the logic behind these 'popular' and 'intellectual' humor styles by means of interviews. People who prefer the popular style expect humor to please and never to hurt. Performance and atmosphere is deemed more important than content. Those who prefer intellectual humor are more interested in content; their humor is more ambiguous and focusses on

creating a shock. Intellectual humor is expected to provide mental stimulation (and confusion), popular humor aims at creating an agreeable atmosphere.