

Individuals and Modernity

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WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of society's transition to modernity, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Mass-Society
2. Social Character
3. Inner-directedness Vs. Other-directedness
4. Postmodernity

1. MASS-SOCIETY

Sociologists throughout the history of the discipline have been interested in the transition from traditional forms of social organization to modern society, which is characterized by capitalism, free markets, individualism, bureaucratic social organization, and a weakening of community and family ties.

The transition to modernity created a **mass-society**, or a society in which the growth of bureaucracy and the quest for material wealth has weakened traditional forms of solidarity and changed the nature of social relationships. Mass-society is characterized by bureaucracy, which is a very impersonal way of dealing with each other.

Max Weber theorized bureaucracy and said that people were going to be living in an iron cage, meaning an impersonal, cold, calculated bureaucratic iron cage, in which people are not engaging each other emotionally and intensely, but rather going through the bureaucracy to engage each other. Living in this bureaucratic shell can be quite stifling, and to some extent, might characterize society today.



TERM TO KNOW

Mass-Society

A society where bureaucracy and the quest for material success have weakened traditional forms of social solidarity.

2. SOCIAL CHARACTER

Your personality is influenced by the society you inhabit and by the social relationships that you have. Each

period, or form of social organization, whether it is traditional or modern mass society, has its own associated social character. A **social character** is a typical pattern of personality and behavior common to members of a society, at a historical point in time.

The social character today is different than it was hundreds or even 50 years ago. Looking at just one category--gender, for example--you can see huge changes in patterns of behavior and personality over the last century. The social character today is certainly different than it was in the traditional era, before the Industrial Revolution and the beginnings of capitalism. Capitalism radically changed people in society, as well as radically changed their social character--they had to be transformed into a laboring society.



BIG IDEA

Social character is inextricably linked up with the institutions of society, and people are products of the society and the times that they're living in.



TERM TO KNOW

Social Character

The typical patterns of personalities and behaviors in society at a particular historical point in time.

3. INNER-DIRECTEDNESS VS. OTHER-DIRECTEDNESS

One way to conceptualize changes in social character with the transition from traditional society to modernity society is inner-directedness versus other-directedness.

Inner-directedness is a social character that ordains in premodern, traditional societies. Inner-directedness is inherently conservative and resistant to change. People are focused steadfastly on the maintenance of tradition and time-honored ways of doing things, and are therefore repeating the traditional patterns of behavior--they are inner-directed. There is little change in society--you know your place when you're born, and you have little pretense for social mobility. In fact, in inner-directed societies, there are very few institutional channels to even promote social mobility.

Other-directedness, on the other hand, is the social character that ordains in modern societies. People are no longer bound to tradition and time-honored ways of doing things. Society now, relative to traditional pre-modern societies, is incredibly flexible--you can experiment with different personalities, identities, careers, and potential selves.

Societies are continuously in motion and socialization occurs in this context. People become much more other-directed, or directed at winning the approval of others and making good self-presentations and impressions in the eyes of ever-shifting groups of others, as they move about society. Other-directedness is a social character that is outwardly focused on being popular, well-liked, and fashionable.



TERM TO KNOW

Inner-directedness

A social character in which people are grounded in tradition and steadfastly conform to time-honored ways of

doing things.

Other-directedness

A social character in which people have an outward focus on making good impressions and being well-liked.

4. POSTMODERNITY

Postmodernity is the stage of social development in which society has moved beyond modernity and industrial production to a post-industrial society. If modernity--capitalism and modern society--was ushered in by the Industrial Revolution, then, scholars argue, we are currently in a postmodern period, a post-industrial society, ushered in by computer technology and the information revolution. The economy is no longer grounded in heavy industry, but rather, it is grounded in information processing.



THINK ABOUT IT

Think about all the jobs in society right now. Not many of them are industrial production--they're primarily post-industrial. There's also been a rise of low-wage service sector jobs. Will this cause an entirely new social character or social formation? Some scholars answer yes.

People want to be seen and treated in a socially differentiated fashion in postmodernity. Before, in the modern period, there was all kinds of mass production, with everyone consuming mass-produced items. Now, this isn't the case. People have unique identities, cultures and cultural politics.

IN CONTEXT

All of your basic needs have been met--you're not starved materially, so now that those needs have been satisfied, you can focus on other, lighter things, like culture and cultural movements and equality. This is a luxury in wealthy, advanced capitalist societies--it's myopic to talk about post-modernity with respect to African societies; it doesn't make sense. However, it might make sense in the context of an advanced capitalist post-industrial society.



TERM TO KNOW

Postmodernity

A stage society enters after modernity in which we move beyond modern social institutions.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about society's transition from traditional forms of social organization to modern society, or modernity, and its creation of a **mass-society**, which is characterized by bureaucracy. You also learned about **social character**, which is a typical pattern of personality and behavior common to members of a society, and how changes in social character can be conceptualized by **inner-directedness** versus **other-directedness**. You also touched upon society's transition to **postmodernity**.



TERMS TO KNOW

Inner-directedness

A social character in which people are grounded in tradition and steadfastly conform to time-honored ways of doing things.

Mass-Society

A society where bureaucracy and the quest for material success have weakened traditional forms of social solidarity.

Other-directedness

A social character in which people have an outward focus on making good impressions and being well-liked.

Postmodernity

A stage society enters after modernity in which we move beyond modern social institutions.

Social Character

The typical patterns of personalities and behaviors in society at a particular historical point in time.