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CHAPTER 11

Contrasts of Carnival

Mardi Gras Between the Modern and the Postmodern

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Over the last few decades, scholars across a variety of disciplines have focused their attention on describing the emergence of a new and uncertain postmodern era. The term "postmodern" is part of larger lexicon of "post" terms—post-industrialism, post-Marxism, post-metropolis, post-Fordism, post-consumerism, and post-structuralism—that anticipate the development of novel types of social organization, power, culture, and aesthetic practices. Diverse thinkers imply

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that the rise of a globalized form of capitalism, a restructuring of space and territorial identity, and the ascendency of information technologies and media-saturated society intimate a new epoch of chaos, fragmentation, discontinuity, and ephemerality (Harvey, 1989; Soja, 2000). On the one hand, postmodernism is not a new term but has a rich and diverse history as reflected in the writings of historian Bernard Rosenberg; architectural scholar Charles Jencks; and sociologists C. Wright Mills, Amitai Etzioni, and Daniel Bell (for an overview, see Best & Kellner, 1991, Chapter 1). On the other hand, a plethora of contrasting postmodern positions now cut across sociology, cultural studies, aesthetics, literature, philosophy, political science, and psychology, among many other fields. Thus, it is now common to see analyses of postmodern society, postmodern war, postmodern art, postmodern music, postmodern literature, postmodern film, postmodern architecture, and so on (for recent views, see Campbell, 2005; Jones, 2003; Magnusson, 2003). The postmodern readings of contemporary society and culture emphasize difference, plurality, and complexity; reject the idea that our theories and methods can represent a social reality; and embrace nonscientific and anti-scientific forms of theorizing and interpretation.

In this chapter, I analyze the Mardi Gras celebration in New Orleans as an expression of larger trends affecting the modern as well as postmodern world. As reflected in literary, film, and music sources, New Orleans is probably most often identified with Mardi Gras, a celebration that symbolizes the city's collective consciousness while anchoring a vast tourism industry of hotels, convention facilities, and gambling. Traditionally, the Carnival season in New Orleans consists of a series of balls and parades from January 6 (Twelfth Night, or the Feast of the Epiphany) to Mardi Gras Day, or "Fat Tuesday," the day before Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. Before the Civil War, Carnival and Mardi Gras developed as a relatively spontaneous and indigenous celebration for local residents that included public masking, masquerade balls, rambunctious street parades, and widespread frivolity. The second half of the 19th century witnessed the growth of new Carnival clubs, krewes (organizations that plan and stage parades), and cultural traditions in New Orleans. During this time, city leaders and economic elites began promoting the local festival as a tourist attraction. By the end of the century, American and European travel writers advised readers that Mardi Gras in New Orleans was a lavish festival that expressed civic pride, community identity, and a local attitude of *"Laissez le bon temps rouler"* (let the good times roll). As the 20th century unfolded, the growth of media coverage, international publicity, and promotional campaigns helped create an enduring public image of Mardi Gras as the most extravagant celebration staged in any American city (Kinser, 1990; Mitchell, 1995). Today, although other cities around the world celebrate Mardi Gras, none have the intemperate and licentious reputation, long-standing cultural traditions, spectacular floats and parades, formal balls, and tourism infrastructure to accommodate the thousands of tourists that visit New Orleans each year.

Over the last three decades or so, Mardi Gras has become permeated by new global flows of tourism investment, intensified media coverage and advertising, and enhanced government attempts to commodify and sell the celebration to corporate sponsors. A variety of corporations are increasingly attaching Mardi Gras symbols and motifs to their products to stimulate consumer demand. *Entertainment Tonight,* MTV, and the Playboy Channel telecast live reports from New Orleans every year, and

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camera crews from the BBC, Japan, and other countries showcase the festivities to a worldwide audience. Across the United States, groups use Mardi Gras as a theme for proms, parties, and meetings; several Las Vegas casinos feature a Mardi Gras motif; and Disney World and Universal Studios regularly schedule New Orleans-style parades. In spite of its extra-local and globalized character, Mardi Gras continues to exhibit features of an indigenous and localized premodern festival marked by rich emotional ties, long-standing and venerable traditions, and a well-defined culture and historical authenticity. Today, many dozens of carnival krewes, parade clubs, and local cultural organizations work to constitute Mardi Gras as a community ceremony and a set of cultural practices that reflect the *joie de vivre* of New Orleans. In addition, while Mardi Gras has changed over the decades, it has remained an organization of rituals and symbolic patterns that local people use to make sense of their experiences, construct notions of local authenticity, and confront the challenges and problems of modern and postmodern society. In short, Mardi Gras is ubiquitous and multifaceted. While Mardi Gras is a local celebration, it is also a marketing slogan to stimulate consumer demand for corporate products, and an imaging device used by private and public actors to enhance the tourism appeal of the city and its region (Gotham, 2002, 2005a, 2005b). The goal of this chapter is to deploy concepts from both modern and postmodern approaches. I maintain that it is a mistake to argue that the transformations that have affected Mardi Gras over the past several decades are primarily an expression of modernity or postmodernity. As I show, we can conceptualize and explain Mardi Gras using Karl Marx's theory of commodification; Max Weber's notion of rationalization; and the postmodern concepts of simulation, implosion, hyperreality, and sign-value.[1]

Between the Modern and Postmodern

The claim of a new social form, a new historical epoch, and a new mode of social and individual experience lies at the heart of postmodern analyses of contemporary society and culture (Best & Kellner, 1997; Dickens & Fontana, 1994; Seidman & Wagner 1992). Building on these insights, diverse thinkers imply that the postmodern symbolizes widespread sociocultural change, but they disagree over its form, impact, and periodization. In a comprehensive survey of the literature, Antonio (1998) suggests that "different sides in the postmodernism debate speak past one another. Heated exchanges are complicated by the term's multiple meanings and conflation of fundamental usage" (p. 24). It is not clear in many debates, for example, if scholars are talking about a shift to a so-called new era of "postmodernity," the impact of "postmodernism" as a cultural form, or the merits and limitations of postmodern theory and method. Best and Kellner (1991, 1997) make a distinction between *postmodernity* as the social and political epoch that generally follows the modern era in a historical sense; *postmodernism* as a form of politics, identity, and set of cultural products (in art, movies, architecture, and so on) that are different from modern politics, identities, and culture; and, finally, *postmodern social theory* as a new mode of theorizing that is distinct from modern social theory (see also Dickens & Fontana, 1994). As Ritzer (1997) puts it, "the idea of the postmodern

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encompasses *a new historical epoch, new cultural products, and a new type of theorizing about the world*" (p. 6, emphasis in original).

Within the mode of theory and method, the postmodern turn emerged during the 1970s and 1980s as a major challenge to both the basic tenets of modern social theory and method, and sociology more generally. While scholars elaborated a host of different postmodern theories and modes of inquiry, five major assumptions came to unite the postmodern: (1) a celebration of difference, identity, and multiculturalism by emphasizing local narratives and micro theory; (2) a rejection of unifying, totalizing, and universal schemes in favor of an emphasis on plurality, difference, and complexity; (3) an abandonment of closed structures and fixed meanings and an adoption of uncertainty, contingency, ambiguity, and irony; (4) a replacement of pragmatic truth seeking with hermeneutics and cultural and theoretical relativism; and (5) an emphasis on removing boundaries within and between academic and cultural disciplines (Best & Kellner, 1997). Emphasizing epochal rupture and radical discontinuity, proponents of postmodernism argued that modernity was finished and that the Enlightenment's emphasis on individual freedom, rationality, progress, and the power of science to better the human condition was bankrupt (for an overview, see Pescosolido & Rubin, 2000). Postmodernists questioned the viability of objectivity and causal analysis in the social sciences and argued that modern theory in the tradition of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and others, was obsolete (for a critical overview, see Antonio & Kellner 1994). Since the 1980s, radical postmodernists have continued to assail modern theory for its scientism that views knowledge as cumulative, coherent, and rational; its foundationalism that aims to find a vocabulary that mirrors the social world and articulates a universal condition; and its essentialism that supposedly fails to account for social differences based on gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation (for overviews, see Best & Kellner, 1997; Dickens & Fontana, 1994; Seidman & Wagner, 1992).

During the 1990s, postmodern orientations began to be incorporated into sociological theorizing and mainstreamed into the larger sociology discipline. Theorists such as Robert Antonio, David Harvey, and Douglas Kellner, among many others, contended that the tendency toward relativism and lack of sociological grounding in postmodernism provided little for the social sciences and contributed to apolitical nihilism and vacuous theorizing. In particular, a past president of the American Sociological Association (ASA), Joe Feagin (1998) asserted that "a postmodern analysis that privileges cultural complexity and diffuseness . . . runs the danger of ignoring or playing down the still central structure-process factors of class, race, and gender" (p. 6). By this time, scholars were making distinctions between "strong" and "moderate" postmodern approaches in an effort to come to terms with postmodernism's ambiguity and diversity of contrasting and conflicting positions.[2] During this decade, scholarly debates in sociology journals, and a plethora of books and edited volumes critiqued, developed, and applied neo-postmodern perspectives to reconceptualize traditional sociological categories—such as agency, structure, gender, social movements, culture, sexuality—while noting the limitations of postmodern approaches.[3] By 2000, articles in the top two American sociology journals, the *American Journal of Sociology* and the *American Sociological Review,* situated postmodern debates within a broader history of the discipline of sociology while noting

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the opportunities postmodern discourses provided for a renewal and strengthening of modern social theory (Antonio, 2000; Pescosolido & Rubin, 2000).

Today, as Edgley (2003) points out, postmodernism "is here to stay" and "its central tenets are rapidly becoming part of the basic conceptual apparatus of sociology." Postmodern concepts such as deconstruction, decentering, foundationalism, hyperreality, identity, implosion, logocentric, narrative, performativity, simulacrum, text, and totalizing have entered the vocabulary of sociology and are now routinely used by sociologists in their empirical and theoretical research. Movements are afoot to identify convergences between postmodern and modern theory, reinterpret modern theorists and theories through a postmodern lens (for examples, see Bergey, 2004; Fontana, 2005; Weinstein & Weinstein, 1994), and point out blind spots and discordant features to reconstruct rather than dismiss modern theory (Antonio, 2000; Antonio & Bonanno, 2000; Gotham & Krier, in press; Mirchandani, 2005). While there remain stark epistemological, analytical, and theoretical differences between sociology and postmodernism, it is clear that we can use the resources of both modern theories and postmodern approaches to illuminate, critique, and analyze the interactions of social structure, human agency, and societal transformation. At a conceptual level, postmodernism offers a loose set of ideas and sensitizing concepts to understand events and processes going on in the world that are novel though not discontinuous with the past. As sociologists, we must pay attention to new ideas and modes of explanation that challenge conventional ways of understanding as well as build on knowledge developed painstakingly over many generations, granting that such knowledge is always limited. It is not enough to assert that present trends and novelties can be explained with long-standing theoretical orientations, traditional conceptual frameworks, or conventional ways of thinking and understanding. To the extent that theories are developed in response to contemporary problems and societal anomalies, we can view the increasing popularity of postmodern ideas as offering fresh insights and innovative views to help us understand the volatility and ambiguity of the present era.

Against either/or positions that assert we are still within modernity or have entered a new postmodern era, I would argue that we are currently between the modern and the postmodern. I show that there are identifiable features of both the modern and the postmodern in Mardi Gras, and postmodern concepts sensitize us to the new forces that are affecting society and culture. One of the central tenets of postmodernism is that we live in "the age of simulation" to the extent that capitalism has moved into a new stage of development where the production of simulations rather than commodities per se now dominates the world (Baudrillard, 1983a). The term *simulation* implies a play of entertaining images, spectacles, and attractions that obliterate distinctions between real and illusory conditions or events. Once simulations come to define the world, reality becomes "hyperreal" whereby the real is produced according to manufactured models. In this situation, people view the image as more authentic (hyperreal) than reality, and the boundary between images and reality implodes. Many scholars view implosion as akin to the de-differentiation or blurring of boundaries between social institutions, classes, politics, culture, and other social activities (for overviews, see Harvey, 1989; Lash, 1990; Urry, 2002;). In a world of simulation and implosion, the power of distinctions collapses and the fantasy worlds of

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celebrity, entertainment, and spectacle become the standard and code to evaluate real life. The unreal Disneyland becomes the framework for building communities throughout the United States; the mythical town of Mayberry in the Andy Griffith Show becomes the model people use to measure the "authenticity" of small-town rural life; and the fictional *CSI* shows provide a code jurors use to evaluate prosecutorial evidence in real-life crime cases. In the realm of simulation, media and consumer society replace lived experience, the passive gaze at images supplants active social participation, and new forms of alienation induce social atomization at a more intense and abstract level than in previous societies. In short, for postmodernists, contemporary life is ruled by the logic of simulation where social reality is not "experienced" by creative and reflexive human agents but is manufactured according to the dictates of bureaucraticized entertainment and commodified media culture.

As I point out, using postmodern concepts can illuminate a series of sociocultural changes that have affected New Orleans over the last several decades and suggest a more fundamental set of transformations of U.S. cities and metropolitan areas more generally. My argument is that we need to explain both continuities and discontinuities in current societal transformations and use a both/and logic in our analyses rather than an either/or logic. In other words, we need to theorize both novelties and discontinuities as well as clarify the bases for ongoing trajectories of development that flow from and are contiguous with broad historical trends. If one of the central objectives of social theory is to provide an interpretive understanding of the world, then postmodern concepts and heuristics can help illuminate processes of societal development and pinpoint novelties and continuities with the past. Just as there is no one coherent modern theory or theory of modernity, there is no single postmodern theory or unified set of assumptions to explain the postmodern condition. Like modern social theories, postmodern theories are plural, hybrid, conflictual, and eclectic.

The Production of Simulacra: Mardi Gras as Commodity-Spectacle

The concept of simulation flows out of a long history of intellectual efforts to theorize the spread of commodification to non-commodified realms of society including religion, politics, art and culture, leisure, and entertainment. Beginning with Karl Marx's penetrating critique of the commodity form and continuing through Georg Lukacs, the Frankfurt School, Henri Lefebvre, and many others, diverse theorists have developed new concepts and heuristic devices to capture the pervasiveness of commodity relations in modern society. The concept of simulation reflects the latest attempts by scholars to explain the accelerating pace of commodification and related processes of rationalization and globalization in everyday life.[4] In the case of New Orleans, simulation draws our attention to the various ways in which powerful economic elites, corporate firms, and tourism boosters use the logic of spectacle and entertainment to transform the Mardi Gras celebration into a major tourist attraction and explicit money-making operation. Over the decades, New Orleans city officials and elites have created several tourism organizations, devised promotional

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strategies, and built attractions to increase tourist travel, commodify space for tourist consumption, and enhance the economic prosperity of the central city. These tourism organizations include the New Orleans Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau (NOMCVB), the New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation (NOTMC), the New Orleans Multicultural Tourism Network (NOMTN), and the Mayor's Office of Tourism and Arts. The various tourist attractions include the building of a domed stadium, a festival mall, a massive convention center, a major theme park, and a World War II museum, among others. The city has also staged many mega-events, including the 1984 World's Fair, periodic Super Bowls and (Nokia) Sugar Bowls, the NCAA basketball tournaments, the Jazz and Heritage Festival, the Essence Festival, and so on. The hotel industry has grown considerably over the last few decades as indicated by the skyrocketing number of hotel rooms in the metropolitan area, from 4,750 in 1960 to more than 33,000 by 2004 (Gotham, 2005a). In the 1990s, global entertainment franchises, including Harrah's casino, Hard Rock Cafe, Hooters, Tower Records, House of Blues, and Planet Hollywood, have opened in New Orleans (Gotham, 2002, 2005a, 2005b).

The development of New Orleans as a tourist destination parallels a huge growth in the annual number of parades and Carnival organizations (krewes), the number of visitors that attend Mardi Gras in New Orleans, and the money generated through the annual celebration. From 1857 to the late 1930s, there were approximately 4–6 parades per Carnival season in New Orleans. The number of parades grew to 10 in 1940, to 21 by 1960, and reached 25 by 1970. During the 1970s and 1980s, the number of parades increased dramatically, reaching a peak of 55 in 1986, and remaining between 45 and 53 ever since. In 2002, the New Orleans Metropolitan Convention and Tourism Bureau estimated that there were more than 6.1 million total parade viewers, 2.24 million day trippers or visitors staying with friends, and almost 1 million tourists staying in hotels during Mardi Gras. Local leaders have tracked the estimated economic impact of the celebration since the mid-1980s and in 2000, overall spending from Mardi Gras hit the $1 billion mark for the first time, according to one economist (McLain, 2000).[5] "Economically, [Mardi Gras is] by far the single-largest special event," said Marc Morial, Mayor of New Orleans from 1994–2002. "It's bigger than Jazzfest, it's bigger than the Sugar Bowl, it's bigger than the Super Bowl" ("For New Orleans," 1999). "It's the major annual event for this city," said Michele Moore, spokesperson for the mayor's office, "We build many of our tourism and marketing strategies around Mardi Gras" (Charles, 1995).

Over the past few decades, an array of public and private groups have emerged to "simulate" Mardi Gras using sophisticated advertising techniques aimed at promoting desire and fantasy, art and design directed to the production of commercial spaces, and other highly refined techniques of image production and distribution. Major corporations such as Bacardi rum, Southern Comfort, Coors beer, Kool cigarettes, and other companies are increasingly attaching Mardi Gras symbols and motifs to their products to stimulate consumer demand. Corporations have long used Mardi Gras imagery and themes to sell their products, but what is new today is the increasing rationalization, homogenization, and standardization of corporate marketing and image-building efforts. While there is considerable diversity in the type and style of simulation, what is common is that corporations recognize the

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profit potential that comes from connecting their products to Mardi Gras, an event known throughout the world and rich with easily identifiable images of fun and entertainment. Coors Light and Heineken now produce Mardi Gras commemorative beer cans and T-shirts that they distribute nationally. Playboy.com has now established a regular presence in New Orleans during Mardi Gras, beaming images of elaborate parties and playmates tossing beads and flirting with tourists. Since 2000, Bacardi has been manufacturing and selling "Bacardi Gras" kits of hats, beads, and Hurricane drink recipes to bars around the nation not just during the carnival season but year-round. In 2001, Captain Morgan's Spiced Rum sponsored its "Bombshells From the Bayou" while *Stuff* magazine presented its "Stuff Girls" entourage on Bourbon Street in the French Quarter. In 2001, Southern Comfort employed a staff of "brand ambassadors" and hired three stars of MTV's *Real World New Orleans* to market the beverage. The company also dispatched members of its marketing team to Buffalo, San Diego, and St. Louis to show consumers how they can use Southern Comfort to make Hurricane drinks and celebrate Fat Tuesday. Southern Comfort has also attempted to market itself as an "authentic" New Orleans tradition by emphasizing that the Southern Comfort secret formula was developed on Bourbon Street.

As the above examples suggest, Mardi Gras stands at the nexus of modernity and postmodernity. Clearly, the processes of commodification and rationalization that define modernity are evident in Mardi Gras. At the same time, Mardi Gras has postmodern ramifications, as the celebration links with larger processes of transformation that are creating a new kind of society and culture dominated by the production and consumption of tourism and entertainment. Tourism is a unique set of global-local relations and practices. As a global industry, tourism is dominated by transnational hotel firms, entertainment corporations, gaming casinos, and professional sports franchises that stamp homogeneity and sameness on otherwise idiosyncratic and heterogeneous places. As a local set of practices, tourism involves efforts by local arts and cultural facilities, museums, and historic preservation groups to construct a sense of cultural distinctiveness as an expedient to attracting consumers and investment. Unlike other commodities that people buy and sell in markets, the tourism commodity and related services are spatially fixed and consumed by tourists at the place of production. Consequently, tourism is an amalgam of both the homogenizing forces of capitalist commodification and bureaucratic rationalization that define modern society *and* the diversifying forces of difference and hybridity that constitute the postmodern condition. On one hand, tourism is a thoroughly modern condition that involves the commodification of local culture and authenticity to entice people to travel to specific locations to consume spaces—spaces of leisure, sport, recreation, nature, amusement, history, exoticism, and otherness. On the other hand, as sociologist John Urry (2002) points out, "Tourism is prefiguratively postmodern because of its particular combination of the visual, the aesthetic, the commercial and the popular" (p. 78). In short, tourism is not about representing or advertising real or authentic representations of a place or culture to attract visitors and investment. Tourism is about simulating local culture to appeal to and satisfy tourist's demands and interests. As a mode of simulation, tourism seeks to expand and enhance the processes of commodification and rationalization and

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transform places into contrived tourist destinations that annihilate real authenticity and create what sociologist Dean MacCannell (1992) calls "staged" authenticity.

We can also see the interplay of the modern and postmodern in the transformation of the Mardi Gras float-building market into a global industry. Today, the New Orleans–based Kern Company is the largest float builder for Mardi Gras and Carnival celebrations throughout the world, netting $20 million in annual revenues from building and maintaining more than 300 floats for 40 parades. Once a local and seasonal business, Kern Studios is now busy year-round not only with designing floats but also renting its facilities for Mardi Gras theme parties. Kern Studios creates sculptures, themed environments, and visual signage for such clients as Paramount Park, Harrah's Casino, MGM Casino, and Circus Casino, among others. Other projects include parades for Disney World in Orlando, Florida; Euro Disney in Paris; Warner Bros. Movie World theme park in Madrid, Spain; Universal Studios in Barcelona, Spain; Samsung Corp.'s Everland theme park in Seoul, South Korea; Par Que Espana outside Osaka, Japan; and Disneyland, Tokyo. In the United States, Kern Studios has signed deals to produce parades at the Gasparilla Pirate Fest in Tampa, Florida; Fiesta San Antonio; and Mardi Gras in Galveston, Texas ("Going for the Purple, Green, and Gold," 2003). Together, the Kern Companies—Kern Studios, Mardi Gras World, and Blaine Kern Artists—earn about half their annual revenue outside New Orleans. Float building, sculpture, and other art-production facilities are now found in Orlando, Florida; Valencia, Spain; and Las Vegas, Nevada (www.kernstudios.com).

Mardi Gras in New Orleans has always been a prime field of spectacle, but in today's global entertainment society, spectacle and simulation combine to enmesh Mardi Gras within an expanding international tourism industry dominated by enhanced spatial flows of people, capital, and commodities. With some exceptions, media coverage, corporate advertising, and tourist modes of presentation frame Mardi Gras as a commodity-spectacle rather than a community-oriented festival that celebrates and symbolizes the cultural identity of New Orleans. Indeed, the appropriation of New Orleans and Mardi Gras imagery and symbols to sell commodities intimates the celebration as a floating signifier that is abstracted and disembedded from local contexts of interaction and meaning creation. This process of simulation is not neutral but reflects the relentless pursuit of corporate profit as ruled by the logic of capitalist competition, commodification, and the rationalization of production and consumption.

Today, a combination of tourism organizations and networks, corporate firms, and government actors are hard at work to transform festivals like Mardi Gras into touristic spectacles. Yet the production of simulacra is constrained by the local uniqueness; place distinctiveness; and the idiosyncratic nature of diverse cultural creations, activities, and relationships. In the realm of tourism, simulation expresses the delocalization of indigenous culture and denotes a situation in which the play of images, signs, and spectacles is the organizing form of postmodern society. An important rationale for creating simulations is that they can be made more spectacular, enticing, and profitable than their authentic counterparts. Today, almost all local festivals are becoming rationalized spectacles and simulations that are organized by the prepackaging and staging of activities and experiences. Thus, the postmodern process

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of simulation articulates with the modern processes of commodification and rationalization to expand consumption opportunities and legitimate the commodity form.

Implosion of Mardi Gras and Tourism

One of the central tenets of postmodernism is that broad social transformations in society and culture have reversed the modern processes of differentiation and specialization and ushered in a new era of implosion or dedifferentiation of social activities, structures, and institutional boundaries. For modern theorists like Durkheim and Marx, modern society is constituted by a process of structural differentiation by which relatively distinct social institutions and activities—such as work and the economy, education, the political system, religion, family, science, and art and culture—come to specialize in particular tasks and functions to reinforce and maintain society. In contrast, postmodern society dissolves the distinctiveness of different spheres of social activity such that institutional forms and meanings implode into one another. Reality television collapses the distinction between the real and the fake; *Entertainment Tonight* blends celebrity information and entertainment codes in with a serious news format to create "infotainment"; the mall-like character of some university student unions blurs the distinction between education and shopping ("edutainment"); and the spread of tourism and amusement-like characteristics to cities erases the differences between authentic and manufactured culture (Disneyification).[6]

The spread of simulation in Mardi Gras draws our attention to the erosion of distinctions between Carnival and other aspects of New Orleans society and culture. Before the 1970s, Mardi Gras was a discrete tourist attraction that the city celebrated for approximately 2 weeks. By the 1970s and 1980s, however, Mardi Gras had become a year-round "industry" with hundreds of local residents employed in float building, museums, and the mass production of souvenirs. It is during these decades that we see the development of a new global network of supply houses and factories to produce and distribute Mardi Gras–themed T-shirts, videos, music, flags, hats, coffee and beer mugs, among many other products displaying the official Mardi Gras colors of purple, green, and gold. The maturation of this industry took place in the 1990s as the Internet opened a burgeoning market for buying and selling Mardi Gras memorabilia, as well as other New Orleans paraphernalia, commemorative souvenirs, and various trinkets. The combination of instantaneous communication with the global reach of the Internet has accelerated the standardization of production of Mardi Gras products and made it possible to purchase and ship Carnival merchandise year-round. Gambinos, one of the larger bakers in the metropolitan area, produces annually up to 165,000 King Cakes—circular green, yellow, and purple cakes—that sell to customers not only in the United States but also in Europe and Latin America (King, 2003). On the one hand, the production of Mardi Gras beads, souvenirs, and memorabilia is no longer the province of local craftspeople geared toward local consumption; it has been appropriated, reimagined, and retooled for mass production and mass consumption. On the other hand,

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the rise of a standardized Mardi Gras industry signifies the dominance of impersonal bureaucratic norms and rational procedures in the production of Mardi Gras. This last point suggests that Mardi Gras continues to be animated with modern modes of production and organization at the same time that the postmodern logic of implosion transforms the celebration.

More important, as Mardi Gras has become a high-profile mega-event for tourist consumption, it has become ever more conflated with tourists' impressions of how New Orleans should look year-round. That is, the spectacular festivities and revelry that used to be confined to a delimited Carnival season and Mardi Gras day (Fat Tuesday) have imploded into the larger everyday life of New Orleans society. Since at least Mardi Gras 2000, more than a dozen Internet cameras have been set up throughout the city to beam images of Mardi Gras (and advertisements for companies) to viewers around the world. Souvenir and trinket shops that specialize in Mardi Gras paraphernalia are open year-round and they design, package, and sell their commodities primarily to tourists and nonresidents. Conventions now provide Mardi Gras beads for conventioneers, and tourists wander about the French Quarter wearing beads year-round. Carnival songs by Cajun, zydeco, and brass bands pulsate from the many clubs, bars, and souvenir shops, creating a continual climax of carnival festivity. At all times of the year, tourists gather beneath Bourbon Street balconies to beg other tourists to toss beads. These and other Carnivaleseque activities suggest that the festive release and transgression that used to distinguish a Carnival and Mardi Gras period of limited duration are now ubiquitous and omnipresent. According to Louis Sahuc, a photographer and French Quarter resident,

> Mardi Gras used to be a special day. We waited for it and enjoyed it. Now we have it every day. Any convention or group that can afford it can stage a parade now. They roll all the time, people wander around in beads year round. (Foster, 1998)

This conflation of New Orleans with Mardi Gras is not accidental or coincidental but is an outgrowth of a series of deliberate and methodical campaigns undertaken by local tourism agencies and advertisers for many years. To stimulate consumption and accumulate profit, tourism organizations, chain entertainment firms, and varieties of corporate marketing now embrace a plethora of advertising strategies and promotional campaigns to elide the distinction between residents and tourists, to urge residents to acquire the consumption practices and visual orientation characteristic of tourists. Unlike residents, tourists are *in* a place but not *of* a place. A presumption of temporariness and looseness of ties is built into the tourist experience as a consumer of culture and place. Reflecting Zygmunt Bauman (1992), tourists have no ties to a place except that of the "consumption of pleasurable experiences" (quoted in Franklin, 2003, p. 208). Residents, on the other hand, are locked into everyday local struggles and conflicts, shared experiences of the mundane and commonplace, and collective practices to create shared rules and cultural traditions to give meaning to their lives. Such actions are the antithesis of touristic experiences, which are explicitly designed to be worry-free, spectacular, extraordinary, and short term. While tourism advertising campaigns directed at residents span many decades, what is new since the 1990s is the scale, intensity, and sophistication of the marketing strategies to

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encourage residents to be tourists in their own hometown. These points and examples suggest that not only does the past distinction between tourism, Carnival, and other aspects of culture implode, but also tourist modes of staging, visualization, and experience become increasingly central to other areas of social life and postmodern society more generally.

In recent years, many cities have hosted Mardi Gras celebrations, attempting to simulate New Orleans–style parades and balls and thereby obliterate distinctions between real and illusory celebrations. Austin, Texas, now celebrates Mardi Gras 4 days past Ash Wednesday, and Nashville, Tennessee, now has a "Mardi Gras in May" that includes several weeks of special jazz and blues performances. The simulated Mardi Gras at Universal Studios park in Florida is a fully commodified experience that is hosted for 44 nights. Adrian LePeltier, the director of the annual Mardi Gras celebration at the Universal Studios park maintains that people cannot tell the difference between the Mardi Gras parade in the park and the "real" one in New Orleans: "The people on the float and the ones lined up along the streets to watch react exactly the same here as they do in New Orleans. We have captured the excitement and quality of those parades." Universal Studios officials contend that spectators get a lot more Mardi Gras things to do, including live music, nightly parades, and "authentic" food and drink. "Our streets turn into the French Quarter every night," according to LePeltier (quoted in O'Brien, 2000).

Beads, Breasts, and Beyond: Hyperreality and Sign-Value

The process of implosion cuts across the postmodern phenomenon of hyperreality. As developed by Umberto Eco (1986) and Jean Baudrillard (1983a, 1983b, 1983c), hyperreality signifies a world that is realer than real, whereby people come to believe that mythical images and models are more authentic than the real activity, place, or person. Hyperreality implies a proliferation of simulations where the boundary separating the extraordinary and spectacular from the everyday and commonplace implodes and people lose the ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality. For Baudrillard (1988), the hyperreal describes the model body, home, or relationship as projected in television, magazines, and media culture that are "models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal." On the one hand, the hyperreal is characterized by intensification or enhancement of reality. On the other hand, the logic of hyperreality is not to imitate the real but to devour the real, whereby everything authentic can be commodified into homogenized and easily exchangeable units that can be bought and sold in markets. In short, for Umberto Eco (1986), simulation and hyperreality combine to not only produce illusion but "stimulate demand for it" (p. 44).

From a postmodern perspective, we can analyze Blaine Kern's Mardi Gras World as an example of a hyperreal realm. Since its opening in 1989, Mardi Gras World has given spending consumers the opportunity to view costumes, shop for gifts, dress up in carnival costumes, and "experience Mardi Gras year-round." Kern's Mardi Gras World rationalizes the production and consumption of entertainment and simulation to provide a more concentrated and intense Carnival experience than

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what one could normally experience in New Orleans during a demarcated season. At the same time, Mardi Gras World supplies a code and model to structure people's interpretations of the celebration. As the Web site tell us,

> Blaine Kern's Mardi Gras World is New Orleans' showcase of carnival, with thousands of sensational sculptured props and breath taking giant figures on display all-year round. . . . Colorful Mardi Gras props, like a gigantic jovial jester, fiercely realistic alligators, and a gorgeously exciting Marilyn Monroe with skirt flying greet one and all to this amazing fantasy factory. You will even view the most awesome floats ever built for carnival . . . you can dress up in authentic, ornate carnival costumes. During the self-guided portion of your tour, you'll enter a maze of amazing props of all sizes. In one area, heaps of props await repair, and you'll see artists, painters, and sculptors creating before your very eyes. A 15-foot torso of the lovely and captivating Cleopatra stands nearby. Follow the yellow arrows to the next "den" (float artists' warehouse). It's a big carpentry and paint shop, where workers build and decorate sensational floats. For each "krewe" (club), artists paint each float with brightly-colored themed scenes . . . The floats appear as colorful and animated as any imaginative Hollywood movie, with strings of lights tracing their outlines to illuminate them at night. (www.mardigrasworld.com)

Mardi Gras World presents a model and ideal version of Mardi Gras, more real than the complex and diverse social reality could ever be. The Kern Company creates a hermetically sealed, completely commodified realm in which one can retreat from the real and consume mythologized history and sanitized culture. Interpreted from a postmodern perspective, we can view Mardi Gras World as a hyperreal world of artificially constructed experience that purifies the banality of Carnival to create an exciting world of mass-mediated, celebrity-inspired, simulated experiences. Interpreted from a modern perspective, we can view Mardi Gras World as an extension of Marx's concept of commodification and Max Weber's notion of rationalization. As a vehicle of commodification, Mardi Gras World restricts access based on ability to pay the admission fee. As a paradigm of bureaucratic rationalization, Mardi Gras World uses the techniques of organizational control and hierarchical administration to reduce uncertainty, achieve goals, and accumulate profit. Reflecting George Ritzer's concept of McDonaldization, just as the fast-food restaurant helps to rationalize and standardize the ability to purchase and consume food, Mardi Gras World incorporates rational procedures to create a carefully controlled pleasure space to enhance the efficiency, calculability, and predictability of obtaining and consuming a Carnival experience.

Another example of how the modern and postmodern intersect in Mardi Gras is in the practice of commodifying and packaging images of women "baring breasts for beads" on Bourbon street in the French Quarter. For years, visitors have flocked to Bourbon street during Mardi Gras to witness people participating in flashing breasts and displaying other forms of nudity and exhibitionism (Shurm & Kilburn, 1996). Yet in recent years, these entertaining and transgressive activities have become marketed to a global audience through sundry videos such as *Girls Gone Wild.* Visual

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technology combined with the growth of international media coverage of Mardi Gras discloses deviant activities and displays them as an entertaining spectacle (Redmon, 2003). In this situation, profiteering entrepreneurs commodify and circulate on a global scale relatively obscure, infrequent, and fleeting images of women baring breasts, erasing distinctions between the real and the imaginary. Once commodified and transmitted globally, the fantasy images simulate reality, and people conflate Mardi Gras with spectacular nudity and believe that exhibitionism is widespread and *the* defining characteristic of Carnival. As much as possible, companies that sell nude Mardi Gras videos seek to blend images of fun and celebration, using nudity as a marketing device, to persuade consumers that the naked female breast is the master sign and signature motif of Mardi Gras. It is interesting to note that, while some people contend that the practice of "baring breasts for beads" has "always existed" in New Orleans, there is little evidence to suggest that it was a popular practice before the mid-1970s. Signs and displays such as "show your tits" and other sexual slogans have become commodified on T-shirts, buttons, and a variety of Mardi Gras paraphernalia. The increasing ubiquity and commercialization of nudity and exhibitionism at Mardi Gras mirror the telecasting of the celebration worldwide.

From a postmodern perspective, we can view Mardi Gras as organized around the production and consumption of simulations, the implosion of tourism and culture, and the display of commodities through which individuals project status and gain prestige. Here the phenomena of simulacra and implosion interconnect with the buying, selling, and display of Mardi Gras souvenirs, paraphernalia, and beads to multiply the quantity of Carnival signs, and thereby generating a proliferation of sign-values. Mardi Gras beads are not just commodities characterized by use-value and exchange-value, as in Marx's theory of the commodity; they also radiate with sign-value, which postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard argues is an expression and mark of honor and cultural distinction. For Baudrillard, the dominance of sign-value signifies a society organized around consumption and the display of commodities as objects of prestige, identity, and standing. In Mardi Gras, the longer and thicker the beads one wears, the higher one's standing in the realm of Carnival sign-value. Thus, just as a commodity's use-value and exchange-value take on meaning according to their positions in a system of economic production, so sign-values take on meaning according to their place in a system of prestige and status. Sign-value reflects a dual process of homogenization-diversification. As Mardi Gras becomes homogenized into simultaneously commodity, spectacle, and simulation, the Mardi Gras sign becomes available in a diversity of consumable forms and images. As Baudrillard (1988) puts it, "in order to become an object of consumption, the object must become a sign" (p. 22).

Theorizing Mardi Gras as between the modern and postmodern sensitizes us to global corporate efforts to increase profit through exploiting labor in the production of Mardi Gras beads and the circulation of sign-values. Indeed, the consumption of beads and the projection of sign-values reflect and are embedded within a global capitalist system of labor exploitation. As depicted in David Redmon's award-winning documentary, *Mardi Gras: Made in China,* the vast majority of Carnival beads are produced by a handful of factories in China and imported to the United States (www.mardigrasmadeinchina.com/news.html). While no official statistics are

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available, estimates suggest that the bead industry sells $500 million (U.S.) of beads each year worldwide. Workers in China sew the plastic beads for $4.25 a day, or about $85 a month. Local krewes contract with U.S. bead distributors to order customized beads to sell to individuals who toss the beads from the parade floats (LaFrance, 2001; Warren & Fowler, 2004). While Mardi Gras beads express the proliferation of sign-values as a constituent of postmodern society, they also symbolize the thoroughly modern process of routinized factory work and capitalist globalization. According to Redmon,

> The workers in the [Mardi Gras bead factory] are employed based on contractual labor and are disallowed to form unions or strike. In fact, it is illegal, a crime to strike or form a union. Consequently, the owner of the factory can fire, fine, punish, or dismiss workers at any time without legitimate justification. The majority of these workers are teenagers and women who migrate from rural provinces in China to work year round in factories. Instead of gaining autonomy, high wages, and job security . . . the factory workers' labor is commodified into contractual relationships in which they work for minuscule piece-work wages. Their employment is often insecure and the jobs they perform are labor intensive, repetitive, and require them to work between ten and eighteen hours a day to create profit for the factory and foreign owners. (www.mardigrasmadeinchina.com/essay_1.html)

As the above quote intimates, the production of Mardi Gras beads has evolved into a labor-intensive industry governed by rational techniques of labor organization and production for mass consumption. Peasant workers in China produce beads at subsistence wages to survive while revelers in the United States consume them as entertaining sign-values during Mardi Gras celebrations in New Orleans and many other cities. Thus, the entertainment and revelry enjoyed by many during Mardi Gras are built upon the exploitative labor of workers in less-developed countries. Mardi Gras thus encompasses both a postmodern domain of simulation, implosion, and hyperreality, *and* a modern world of commodification and rationalization.

Conclusion

In his classic treatise, *Capital, Volume I*, Karl Marx described modernity as a volatile and unstable system where "all that is solid melts into air" and everything is "pregnant with its contradictory." Modern life is a life of irony, paradox, and contradiction (Berman, 1982). Marx's melting metaphor sensitizes us to ironies and contradictions of Mardi Gras while directing our attention to the macro processes of rationalization and commodification that are transforming the celebration, generating a condition of chronic instability and ephemerality. Mardi Gras continues to be animated by modern forms of organization while new processes of simulation, spectacle, hyperreality, and implosion increasingly permeate the celebration. As I have pointed out, postmodern concepts call attention to the changes and novelties of the present

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moment. In addition, by deploying the resources of both modern and postmodern theory, I have eschewed interpretations of the present conjuncture in terms of discontinuity, radical break, or epochal rupture, as was popular among postmodernists during the 1970s and 1980s. Here I have followed the lead of scholars such as Antonio (2000), Berman (1982), Giddens (1991), Harvey (1989), and Jameson (1991), among others who have viewed postmodernity as an intensification of modernity or a radicalizing moment within a long, uneven, and conflictual historical development of modern society. My goal has been to combine postmodern concepts to identify novel features of Mardi Gras while situating the transformation of the celebration within broader sociocultural transformations that are affecting society. Giving postmodern terms a sociological footing and analytical grounding helps point to a strengthening and fuller development of social theory and sociology more broadly. In addition, proceeding eclectically by merging modern with postmodern concepts not only offers an opportunity to reinvigorate empirical and theoretical sociology, but also helps to update, clarify, and provide nuance to our understandings of the modern process of commodification and rationalization.

Although the modern and postmodern concepts sensitize us to the different processes that are affecting Mardi Gras, viewing Mardi Gras as either modern or postmodern is reductive, one-sided, and limited. Just as New Orleans has changed economically, culturally, and socially, over the decades, so too has Mardi Gras changed with the times. Today, Mardi Gras is a many-sided phenomenon that expresses a variety of diverse meanings. In spite of the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina, more than 50 parades took to the streets of New Orleans during 2006 to celebrate Carnival and Mardi Gras. For local leaders, Mardi Gras 2006 was an important statement of the city's strength and fast-paced rebuilding efforts. More than 300 news outlets from around the world, including every European country, Russia, Taiwan, Australia, and China, visited New Orleans to report and showcase the Carnival festivities to a global audience. While some derided the idea of celebrating Mardi Gras in the context of hardship and devastation, others looked to the celebration as a means of reaffirming local culture and reconstituting a sense of community identity. Today, the devastation of Hurricane Katrina is leading to new calls to commercialize Mardi Gras, expand the advertising of Carnival, and sell the celebration to corporate sponsors as an expedient to rebuilding New Orleans. On the other hand, local residents and Carnival enthusiasts have launched vehement protests and assailed corporate and government efforts to turn the celebration into a contrived tourist attraction that is abstracted from local culture and empty of communal value.

Generally speaking, debates over commercialization and the future of New Orleans and Mardi Gras express disagreements over meanings of authenticity in the city's signature celebration, who owns Carnival, and how people should use and celebrate Carnival to invigorate local culture. Thus, Mardi Gras is multifaceted and the more theories, concepts, and methods one can bring to its analysis, the better one will be able to enrich sociological understanding of the celebration and broader cultural phenomenon. Moreover, multidimensional theorizing that borrows concepts and heuristics from both modern and postmodern approaches can assist in uncovering the variety of connections between local events and larger processes of modernity and postmodernity that affect our lives.

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Notes

1. Drawing upon the work of Karl Marx and other scholars, I define *commodification* as the conversion of local products, cultures, and social relations and identities into saleable products that are sold on markets for profitable exchange. Following Max Weber, *rationalization* refers to a process whereby social actions and interactions become based on considerations of efficiency and calculation rather than on motivations derived from custom, tradition, or emotion (for overviews and applications of these terms, see Antonio & Bonanno 2000; Berman, 1982; Gotham, 2002; Gotham & Krier, in press).

2. During the 1970s and 1980s, proponents of "strong" postmodernism such as Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Lyotard, and others proclaimed the death of the "real," rejected the idea of the "social" as a theoretical and empirical category, called for a "war against totality," and championed new postmodern discourses and politics to deal with the striking novelties of the present (Baudrillard, 1983a, 1983b, 1983c; Lyotard, 1984). Others such as Harvey (1989) and Jameson (1991) dismissed the ideas of "strong "postmodernism and argued that postmodernism was a cultural manifestation of a larger intensification and acceleration of capitalist commodification and global expansion (for an overview of "strong" and "moderate" postmodernism, see Antonio, 1998, pp. 30–31).

3. For scholarly debates on postmodernism in sociology journals, see Antonio (1991); Gottdiener (1993, 1994); Kivisto (1994); Seidman (1991). For critical and celebratory books on postmodernism, see Best and Kellner (1991, 1997), Denzin (1991), and Lemert (1997); see also contributors to edited volumes by Dickens and Fontana (1994), Nicholson and Seidman (1995), and Seidman and Wagner (1992).

4. Globalization implies the intensification of social and geographical interconnectedness and an accelerated circulation of people, capital, information, and cultural symbols on a worldwide scale. Globalization is an uneven and conflictual historical process that occurs through the interaction of commodification and rationalization processes (for overviews and applications of these terms, see Antonio & Bonanno 2000; Gotham & Krier, in press).

5. James McLain also reported that Mardi Gras 2003 generated $20.5 million in direct tax revenues for the city of New Orleans while costing $4.6 million for city services such as police overtime and trash collection (reported in Dart, 2006).

6. Scholars have used the concept of Disneyification to suggest that amusement park characteristics are imploding into virtually every other realm of society. In urban sociology, for example, this city-as-theme-park explanation suggests that urban spaces are being refashioned into places of fun and entertainment to attract consumption-based investment and spending consumers. As discussed by many scholars, *Disneyification* is the use of theming techniques, the promotion of corporate brands, the dominance of security and surveillance, and the blurring of boundaries between consumption and other social activities. Scholars argue that what diverse places such as Disneyland, Las Vegas, Times Square in New York City, heritage sites, and "theme parks" share is a decontextualization of place that elides the distinction between past and present, and real and staged authenticity (Bryman 1999; Eeckhout, 2001; Sorkin 1992).

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Discussion Questions

1. The word *postmodern* has entered everyday life in the modern world, but people often have rather varied and vague notions of what the word means. Based on what you read in this chapter, how would you define the postmodern? What is its relationship to the modern? To the extent that you think postmodern is a relevant characterization of contemporary social life, has it superseded the modern, or do the two coexist?

2. Gotham describes Mardi Gras as a commodity-spectacle. What is he arguing here? To begin with, what do you understand the word *spectacle* to mean? Do you agree or disagree with his characterization of Mardi Gras as a spectacle?

3. While in many ways, New Orleans was and is a unique city in America, other cities rely on tourism and one can find evidence of spectacles in them, too. Choose a city you are familiar with and propose the outline of a postmodern analysis of that place similar to the analysis of New Orleans offered in this chapter. What difference does it make that a city has a fairly lengthy history (e.g., New York City, San Francisco) or does not (e.g., Las Vegas)?

4. What do Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard mean by hyperreality? How does this concept relate to a culture saturated by the mass media and by consumerism? Discuss the relevance of the term for making sense of Mardi Gras in New Orleans.

5. Should Gotham's postmodern analysis of Mardi Gras be read as a theoretical alternative to a Marxist analysis, with its emphasis on economic exploitation, or can the two positions be mutually reinforcing? Explain.