

## EDITORIAL

## The Ever Evolving and Evasive Nature of Knowledge

Jeffrey Alexander (2003) provided perhaps the most compelling argument that the deep meanings embedded in a culture are the most determinative variable of all things sociological. Most recently, Christian Smith provided a captivating example of the pre-eminence of cultural zeitgeist in explaining *Why Religion Went Obsolete* (2025) in America at the turn of this millennium. More broadly and historically, human culture and consciousness in the Global North have evolved profoundly over the respective eras of the past two millennia. Centered on modernity, those eras can be characterized and summarized concisely as follows:

| <b>Pre-modernity</b><br>circa late 500s BCE<br>to early 1600s CE | → | <b>Modernity</b><br>circa mid-1600s<br>to mid-1900s | → | <b>Postmodernity</b><br>circa mid-1900s<br>to early 2000s (Severan 2021) |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|---|-----------------------------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>What is the nature of knowledge?</i>                          |   |                                                     |   |                                                                          |
| - traditional and religious                                      |   | - rational and scientific                           |   | - socially constructed                                                   |
| <i>What is authoritative?</i>                                    |   |                                                     |   |                                                                          |
| - religion and God                                               |   | - logic and science                                 |   | - the self and/or the group                                              |
| <i>What is virtue?</i>                                           |   |                                                     |   |                                                                          |
| - conviction                                                     |   | - rationality                                       |   | - open-minded tolerance                                                  |
| <i>What is evil?</i>                                             |   |                                                     |   |                                                                          |
| - tolerance                                                      |   | - subjectivity                                      |   | - conviction                                                             |
| <i>Worldview and Meta-narrative</i>                              |   |                                                     |   |                                                                          |
| - implicit                                                       |   | - explicit                                          |   | - critical and cynical                                                   |
| <i>Stance toward Social Structure</i>                            |   |                                                     |   |                                                                          |
| - acceptance of order                                            |   | - imposition of order                               |   | - embrace of disorder                                                    |
| <i>Means toward Social Order</i>                                 |   |                                                     |   |                                                                          |
| - social control                                                 |   | - self-control                                      |   | - no control                                                             |
| <i>Source of Identity</i>                                        |   |                                                     |   |                                                                          |
| - the collective                                                 |   | - the individual                                    |   | - the community                                                          |
| <i>Nature of Everyday Reality</i>                                |   |                                                     |   |                                                                          |
| - given and<br>enchanted                                         |   | - coherent and<br>disenchanted                      |   | - incoherent and<br>simulated hyper-reality                              |
| <i>Shared Interests</i>                                          |   |                                                     |   |                                                                          |
| - security and<br>solidarity                                     |   | - control of environment<br>through technologies    |   | - communication and<br>collective action                                 |

| Pre-modernity                        | → | Modernity         | → | Postmodernity                  |
|--------------------------------------|---|-------------------|---|--------------------------------|
| <i>Attitude toward Social Life</i>   |   |                   |   |                                |
| - earnest                            |   | - blasé           |   | - ambivalent                   |
| <i>Orientation toward the Future</i> |   |                   |   |                                |
| - fatalistic resignation             |   | - optimistic hope |   | - pessimistic despair/nihilism |
| <b>Defining Feature</b>              |   |                   |   |                                |
| Providence                           |   | Progress          |   | Particularities                |

Contemporary sociological theorists as well as social theorists more generally are divided on what era we inhabit today. Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck, Zygmunt Bauman, Jurgen Habermas, Manuel Castells, and Charles Taylor argue that we are still in late, radical, or hyper-modernity. Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Fredric Jameson, and Jean Baudrillard argue that we have transitioned to postmodernity. While both modern and postmodern knowledge systems can be critiqued on many levels, the latter has been criticized more severely as a) a form of playing with ideas, especially with rhetoric and discourse, b) a self-referential fallacy of rejecting grand narratives while being one itself, c) a valid critique of modernity without offering a way forward, leading to profound cynicism, pessimism, and nihilism, d) a failure to live up to modern scientific standards (which postmodernists reject outrightly in the first place), and e) an ideology that only cares about being believed, not about being true. Indeed, the primary problem of postmodernity is its creation of a post-truth culture where charisma and power (or both, e.g., Donald Trump) prevail in a world of “fake news,” “fake science,” “fact-free politics,” and “alternative facts” in general. Manuel Castells, for one, dismissed postmodern theory as “celebrating the end of history, and, to some extent, the end of Reason, giving up on our capacity to understand and make sense” (Castells 1996:4).

Other theorists suggest that we now actually inhabit a subsequent era of post-postmodernity. For example, Dutch philosopher Rob Wijnberg (2020) details a description of the evolution of truth in particular over the first three and now fourth eras of human culture and consciousness in the Global North as follows:

| Method for Establishing Truth                                             | Type of Truth  | Nature of Truth                              | Zeitgeist             |                                                 |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|----------------------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Premodernity: Truth as <b>Faith</b> 300 B.C.E. – 1600 C.E.             | - revelation   | - mythical, religious, transcendent          | - metaphysical, given | - surrender, redemption, salvation in afterlife |
| 2. Modernity: Truth as <b>Knowledge</b> 1600 – 1900 C.E.                  | - discovery    | - earthly, rational, empirical               | - objective, found    | - control, progress                             |
| 3. Postmodernity: Truth as a <b>Construct</b> 20 <sup>th</sup> century    | - construction | - cultural, relational, socially constructed | - subjective, created | - skepticism, irony, self-creation              |
| 4. Post-postmodernity: Truth as a <b>Product</b> 21 <sup>st</sup> century | - production   | - produced, formatted, consumer-based        | - commercial, sold    | - self-affirmation, profit-maximization         |

In sum, Wijnberg's thesis is that truth is now no longer given (via premodern revelation), found (via modern discovery), or created (via postmodern construction). Truth is produced to be sold – "truth be sold." Truth, knowledge, and morality have been supplanted by productivity, efficiency, and return on investment, whether economic, political, or social. We are now merely consumers, not citizens, in politics, healthcare, education, religion, family, media, and more. Whereas postmodern truth as a construct was at least positively intended to liberate humans from false authorities and universal pretensions of Truth (capital T), post-postmodern truth as a product seeks not to liberate, but only to satisfy our wants. For example, politics is no longer about convincing people about the (de)merits of policies, but rather about having "voters consume their own opinion."

Thankfully, yet another form of modernity has arisen in the last few decades in reaction to both modernity and postmodernity. Dutch cultural theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker articulated the first academic definition of metamodernism, describing it as both a "structure of feeling" and a pendulum which "oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity" (2010). Comparing the respective eras further, Luke Turner writes that,

Whereas postmodernism was characterized by deconstruction, irony, pastiche, relativism, nihilism, and the rejection of grand narratives, the discourse surrounding metamodernism engages with the resurgence of sincerity, hope, romanticism, affect, and the potential for grand narratives and universal truths, whilst not forfeiting all that we've learnt from postmodernism. Thus, rather than simply signaling a return to naïve modernist ideological positions, metamodernism considers that our era is characterized by an oscillation between aspects of *both* modernism and postmodernism. We see this manifest as a kind of informed naivete, a pragmatic idealism, a moderate fanaticism, oscillating between sincerity and irony, deconstruction and construction, apathy and affect, attempting to attain some sort of transcendent position, *as if* such a thing were within our grasp. (2015)

In seeking a transcendent position, the emergent metamodern era is itself aligned with yet another “post” era, that of post-secularity, which is the current return of religion to the public sphere after being stringently sequestered to the private realm by both modernity and postmodernity (Lombaard, Benson, and Otto 2019). More specifically,

post-secular societies are neither religious nor secular, they do not prescribe or privilege a religion, but neither do they actively and intentionally refrain from doing so. They are neither for nor against religion(s). ... For them, religion has ceased to be something to which a society or a state has to relate in embracing, rejecting, prescribing, negating, or allowing it, ... and hence there is no need for them to be secular anymore. (Dalferth 2010:317)

Significantly, metamodernism and post-secularity have together brought spirituality back into broader interdisciplinary conversations after both modernism and postmodernism had dismissed it for different reasons (Severan 2021; Vliegenthart 2025). Brendan Graham Dempsey, editor of the 7-volume *Metamodern Spirituality Series* and, most recently, author of *Metamodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Cultural Logics* (2023), is perhaps the leading proponent of metamodern Christianity. “Drawing on the insights of all the previous cultural paradigms, the revelation of God's nature and the deepening quality of the relationship between God and man can be understood as progressing through a series of covenants/dispensations that map to a learning process unfolding through time” (Dempsey 2024). Similarly, in exploring “the potential to reclaim faith in Christ in a contemporary, intellectually responsible way,” philosopher Matthew David Segall states that

Ultimately, I'd hope that a metamodern approach to Christianity can transcend binaries—between history and eternity, Jesus and the cosmic Christ, and between religions themselves. Such an approach would also be able to integrate scientific and religious wisdom, recognizing that both are necessary for a comprehensive understanding of reality. After all, science, in its devotion to

truth, is itself a variant form of religious pursuit grounded in metaphysical assumptions about the intelligibility and unity of nature. (2024)

Notably, there are also strong “elective affinities” between metamodern Christianity and the “constructively postmodern” Christian process theology developed by John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin. “Metamodern Christians recognize that the Jesus of history isn't identical to the Christ of faith, and they acknowledge the evolving meaning of Jesus” (McDaniel).

Given the evolution of culture and consciousness in the Global North to this point in history – presumably little more could be done with the term “modern” in the future – and the impact of respective historical eras on Christianity, what metamodernism requires is a corresponding post-disciplinary meta-theoretical perspective of knowledge, that is, a theory about theory. Not so coincidentally, and perhaps divinely, that is precisely what the critical realist corrective to both modernism and postmodernism provides. First articulated by English philosopher of science Roy Bhaskar (1975; 1979) as “transcendent realism,” critical realism has risen to prominence recently aided by the advocacy of sociologists Andrew Sayer and Philip Gorski, and Christian sociologists Margaret Archer and Christian Smith. (For a critical evaluation of critical realism, see Zhang 2023.)

Critical realism is built on Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant’s distinction in *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) between noumena – ultimate reality that exists independent of our perception – and phenomena – objects and events we experience through our senses as shaped by our cognition. As the study of phenomena, sociology has been divided between those who do so from two starkly contrasting assumptions of knowing. Empirical positivism, as practiced by Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, and contemporary exchange and rational choice theories, assumes that factual knowledge comes only from things that can be experienced with the senses, or proved by logic. Contrarily, social constructionism, as eminently explicated and elucidated by Berger and Luckmann (1966), and also known as interpretivism as practiced by Max Weber and contemporary symbolic interactionism, assumes that humans construct knowledge through their intelligence, experiences, and interactions with the world in a subjective search for meaning. Sociological positivism is a child of the modern natural sciences, whereas social constructionism is an older sibling of postmodern perceptions. Additional features can be summarized as follows:

| <b>Ontology</b>     | <b>Empirical Positivism</b>                                        | <b>Social Constructionism</b>                                        |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Epistemology</b> | Objectivism                                                        | Interpretivism                                                       |
| <b>Reality</b>      | is external, stable, ordered, patterned, pre-existing              | is internal, fluid, socially constructed, multiple, emergent         |
| <b>Knowledge</b>    | is objective, measurable, value-free, universal, de-contextualized | is subjective, indeterminate, value-rich, particular, contextualized |
| <b>Aim</b>          | explanation, prediction, control                                   | description, understanding, empathy                                  |
| <b>Researcher</b>   | dis-interested scientist                                           | participant-interpreter                                              |

However, critical realism is a third, middle ground between empirical positivism and social constructionism, and consists of three pillars. It maintains that

much of reality exists and operates independently of our human awareness of it (ontological realism), that our human knowledge about reality is always historically and socially situated and conceptually mediated (epistemic perspectivalism), and that it is nonetheless possible for humans over time to improve their knowledge about reality, to adjudicate rival accounts, and so to make justified truth claims about what is real and how it works (judgmental rationality). All three of these beliefs must go together to promote the acquisition of human knowledge. (Smith 2017:9)

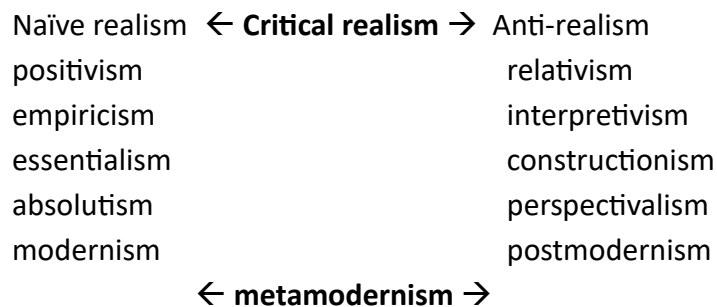
Most significantly, critical realism also posits three levels of reality; reality is not flat. Pictured as three concentric circles, the “real” is the largest, outer, all-inclusive circle, comprised of all the material, non-material, and social “mechanisms” that exist, whether humans are aware of them or not, each mechanism having its own structures and causal capacities. The “actual” is the middle circle, comprised of all the mechanisms that have been activated, producing events in time and space, whether observed by humans or not. The “empirical” is the smallest, inner circle, comprised of all the mechanisms that have been both activated and observed, the domain of our direct or indirect phenomenological experience of the real or actual. Therefore, “what we observe (the empirical) is not identical to all that happens (the actual), and neither is identical to that which *is* (the real). The three must not be conflated” (Smith 2010:93).

Critical realists also differentiate between the intransitive, which is the object of knowledge as it is, and the transitive, which is our theories about the intransitive object and how we go about studying it, producing fallible social constructions that change over time while

the intransitive object remains unchanged. New Testament scholar N. T. Wright is representative of relevant Christian scholarship when he explains that critical realism

is a way of describing the process of “knowing” that acknowledges the *reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower* (hence ‘realism’), while fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiraling path of *appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known* (hence ‘critical’).” (2004:35)

The meta-theoretical perspective of critical realism thus corrects the two polar opposite meta-theoretical perspectives that have characterized sociology. Modern, positivistic, naïve realism arrogantly maintains that its knowledge of reality is direct, complete, final, and universal. Postmodern, constructivist anti-realism skeptically maintains that there is no necessary correspondence between perception and reality, and that all knowledge is relative. But metamodern critical realism humbly maintains that all knowledge of reality is indirect, partial, and revisable, that much of reality exists independent from human awareness of it, and that absolute Truth exists, but is evasive, and the best humans can do is gain one perspective of it.



← **metamodernism** →

The resonance of critical realism with metamodern Christianity is clearly evident in their mutual ontology, epistemology, and normativity, the latter collapsing the untenable dichotomy of fact and value, of the descriptive is and the prescriptive ought (Vermurlen 2024). And what critical realism obviously not only allows but suggests is the whole realm of the spiritual, including the Christian mystical “cloud of unknowing” (2009). We humans long for transcendence, and intuit something more, something real beyond the empirical, and something which is not merely socially constructed. As such, spirituality is conceivably a real mechanism with its own causal capacities that exists independent from human awareness of it. When it is activated, or perhaps because it is constantly activated, it is also actual, producing events in time and space, whether observed by humans or not. When it is sensed by humans through direct or indirect experience, it also becomes empirical and to that extent knowable and known. Spirituality presumably, and by definition, takes us beyond both empirical positivism and social constructionism, that is, beyond sociology itself.

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