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David Craven

MODERNITY.

This entry includes three subentries:

Overview
Africa
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OVERVIEW

Modernity is best understood as a condition, rather than as the designation for some particular period of time. Aspects of the modern condition can arise at any time and place, but they are most generally associated with historical trends arising out of Cartesian philosophy, industrial capitalism, revolutionary politics, and the cultural changes of the turn of the nineteenth century. The main lesson to be learned from the postmodernism of the late twentieth century is that the tensions of modernity are still with us.

Of course, the term *modern* has narrower uses in particular fields of human endeavor, including especially art and architecture. The use of the term in the sense discussed here, as a syndrome of conditions associated with the modern mode of human life, is relatively recent. The French revolutionaries, for example, did not think of themselves as modern. When characterizing the more forward-thinking aspects of his time, the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) did not call them modern or even enlightened, but described the late eighteenth century as undergoing a process of enlightenment. Classically, the term *modern* contrasts the present day as opposed to some time in the past, or more specifically, it contrasts ancient times with the modern times subsequent to them, as in Bernard of Chartres's famous twelfth-century description of moderns as dwarves sitting on the shoulders of giants. *Modern* may also apply as an adjective denoting novelty, as in the phrase "modern conveniences."

From a general point of view, however, modernity should be understood as a condition, mentality, or syndrome presenting characteristic dilemmas to human beings that remain both defining and unresolvable. Elements of the modern condition

include rejection of traditional authority, a progressive rather than cyclical notion of time, individual and collective emancipation, a broadly empiricist orientation toward understanding the world, and what John Dryzek has called a Promethean outlook that regards all difficulties as technical problems to be mastered through human endeavor. As a heuristic, contrasts with unmodern conditions may be useful, as in Jürgen Habermas's point that "before the French Revolution, before the workers' movements in Europe, before the spread of formal secondary education, before the feminist movement . . . the life of an individual woman or man had less worth—not regarded from our own point of view, of course, but from the contemporary perspective" (p. 106). The modern horrors of the twentieth century, however, should cause one to be careful to apply these distinctions to elements of human practice, rather than to specific individuals or groups. The impulse to define some people along a premodern/modern axis, itself an outgrowth of characteristically modern impulses toward rational social management, should be resisted, whether the people are described as characteristically modern, as Richard Wagner said of the Jews, or as characteristically premodern, as European colonists considered aboriginal residents of the New World. The tension in this very practice of defining modernity in people and practices, with its disparate results ranging from attempted extermination to processes of emancipation, respectively, reveals the inescapably dialectical nature of the modern condition.

Indeed, an accelerated and socially powerful process of conceptual change constitutes a key element of the modern condition. Reinhart Koselleck has argued that in modernity, "political and social concepts become the navigational instruments of the changing movement of history. They do not only indicate or record given facts. They themselves become factors in the formation of consciousness and the control of behavior" (p. 129). Koselleck illustrates this process with the quintessentially modern concept of emancipation: once the reflexive verb, to emancipate oneself, gained currency beyond its origins among philosophers and literati and began to be used widely among participants in the revolutionary politics of late-eighteenth-century France, it became linguistically impossible, as it were, to defend the institutions of the Old Regime. The linguistic turn in philosophy and social theory attests to the modern role of language as constituting experience itself. Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) argued that language illuminates specific, comprehensive modes of being in the world; Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) later refined this idea with the idea that human beings move within "horizons" of linguistic prejudices. Philosophers as different as Habermas, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Hannah Arendt have explored the potential for commonalities in language usage to overcome seemingly fundamental barriers among human beings.

Modern theorists do not agree about the role played by historical subjects in effecting the conceptual changes that seem to drive a constantly evolving public sphere. Whereas Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) spoke abstractly of the progress of *Geist* (mind, consciousness, spirit) and Michel Foucault (1926–1984) revealed the socially constructed nature of the concepts and practices that constrain human beings, Karl Marx (1818–1883) and his followers argued that false consciousness could be overcome, while Sigmund Freud

(1856–1939) and his successors sought to overcome the damage done to individual mental health by modern social pressures through psychoanalysis. Some lines of modern argument are characterized by progressive optimism regarding the power of enlightened human reason, once freed from the shackles of tradition, to remake society according to rational principles. Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and his fellow utilitarians, for example, supported a slate of social reform programs, including birth control and humane treatment of prisoners, based on their application of the principle of the greatest happiness for the greatest number to society at large. In another indication of the dialectical tensions inherent in modernity, Bentham's rationalist vision of prison reform, originally intended to redeem the inherent worth and social value of every individual, even those abandoned to the horrors of the premodern prisonhouse, has evolved, as Foucault has demonstrated, into a near-totalitarian vision of social control over the resisting individual. Bentham's modern design for a prison, the "panopticon," has become the blueprint for the present-day "supermax" vision not of rehabilitation, but of central control.

Alexis de Tocqueville's (1805–1859) seminal thinking about this dynamic between modern egalitarian democracy and quasi-despotic central control happened to begin with a study of the early-nineteenth-century American prison system, which in Pennsylvania and New York exemplified Benthamite reformist principles. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville warned his fellow Europeans that democratic equality was not a passing fad, that although it broadened opportunities for the masses, it threatened national and individual greatness, and that without a strong network of intermediate institutions, democracy was likely to resolve into centralized administrative despotism. Tocqueville's dystopian vision contrasts with Bentham's progressivist faith in reason's beneficence: modern individuals in American democracy may be free of the old tyrannies of class and king, but they are subject to new forms of despotism rooted in their very freedoms. Like John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), Tocqueville argued that modern social mobility requires individuals to devote most of their energy to economic well-being, to the exclusion of more noble pursuits. Worse, without the traditional intermediaries of the estates checking the central power of the state, democracies will tend toward ever more powerful government. As modern individuals torn by accelerating social pressures become alienated from their premodern social support systems, they are vulnerable to domination by "an immense tutelary power . . . which alone takes charge of assuring their enjoyments and watching over their fate. It is absolute, detailed, regular, far-seeing, and mild. It would resemble paternal power if, like that, it had for its object to prepare men for manhood, but on the contrary, it seeks only to keep them fixed irrevocably in childhood . . . can it not take away from them entirely the trouble of thinking and the pain of living?" (p. 693).

What Habermas calls the "enlightenment project" thus doubles back on itself. Whereas for Kant, republican government (that is, government responsible to the people) forms an essential part of the emancipation of human beings to autonomy, for Tocqueville this same institution could lead to autonomy's opposite, to the infantilization of the population under a paternal power far worse than any premodern royalist

opposed by the likes of John Locke and Thomas Jefferson. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) had identified this irony of modernity already in the eighteenth century. In his first *Discourse* he outlines the many sacrifices human beings have had to make to become modern, including even the possibility of authentic relations with each other. However, for Rousseau there is no going back: modern consciousness, once achieved, cannot be forgotten but must enable modern human beings to devise new institutions for achieving a modern kind of authenticity. Similarly, the English poet William Wordsworth (1770–1850) complained in an 1807 sonnet of the loss of authentic relations among newly rational modern human beings:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
The Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not. —Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.
(Sonnet No. 18).

The loss of the old gods, of traditional ways and of the comforts of an unquestionable worldview worried Wordsworth, the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843), and many others, but presented an opportunity to those modern thinkers seeking to replace the Old Regime with rational modes of human being. Chief among these were Marx and Engels, who noted with pleasure that in modern life "all fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind" (p. 68). Marx's optimism was undergirded by his faith in the power of reason; he expects human "sober senses" to point out the direction to progress. Nietzsche has a similar diagnosis of the origins of contemporary institutions in the interests of the few, but no accompanying expectation that the application of modern human reason can end this dynamic:

With the aid of such images and procedures [as flaying and quartering criminals], man was eventually able to retain five or six "I-don't-want-to's" in his memory, in connection with which a *promise* had been made, in order to enjoy the advantages of society—and there you are! With the aid of this sort of memory, people finally came to "reason"! —Ah, reason, solemnity, mastering of emotions, this really dismal thing called reflection, all these privileges and splendors man has: what a price had to be paid for them! how much blood and horror lies at the basis of all "good things"! (p. 42)

Faced with the failure of received ideas, and without the optimistic view that modern reason could replace previous illegitimate modes of life with authentic modes, Nietzsche calls on (at least some) modern human beings to embrace the disorientation that comes with recognition of the modern condition, and to create their own sets of values.

Such a solution has obvious shortcomings when it comes to social coordination. Most observers of the collapse of traditional values felt less exhilarated than paralyzed, waiting for the inevitable new mode of collective human being. The Irish poet Yeats, in his 1921 work "The Second Coming," an exquisitely modern poem, both formally and in its content, worries thus:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

The quintessentially modern poem depends on a fundamentally premodern concept of time: for Yeats, time is not progressive, but cyclical. Modernity as a human condition is characterized by such ironies: as democratic politics empowers the subject, social scientific research demonstrates the subject's disempowerment; as modern political thought looks to abstraction to resolve premodern injustices, that most particular institution of the national state is the main agent against them; as modern science enables increasing technical mastery of nature, it simultaneously demonstrates nature's mastery over individuals.

Small wonder, then, that antimodern movements of nearly infinite variety have sprung up around the globe in recent years. Responding to the arguments of Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and many others sympathetic to the critique of modernity, Habermas has argued that

only further enlightenment . . . has grown from the devastation of enlightenment. . . it is only through reason

that we can determine the limits of our rationality. *This* is the fundamental figure of Kantian thought that was definitive for modernity. And modernity can't just be peeled off like a dirty shirt. It's in our skin. We find ourselves in a condition of modern life: we didn't freely choose it; it is existentially unavoidable. But for the opened eyes of modernity, this condition also implies a challenge, and not just a disaster. (p. 94)

See also Democracy; Enlightenment; Modernism; Public Sphere; Utilitarianism.

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AFRICA

The debates and controversies over modernity, from its origins in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century western Europe to the various sites of its deployment following the formation of colonial empires, have given rise to an abundance of literature. Non-Western societies, by and large, in the formation of their cultural, political, economic, and social identities and their reactions to it, have appropriated or not, accommodated or not, resisted or not, in many different ways, what is usually referred to as the project of modernity (or modernization). Associated at first with colonization, and then with independence, modernity involves an understanding of several issues connected with modes of

When modernity is explained in terms of history, it is said that the world first experienced renaissance, and then, enlightenment and thereafter modernity and postmodernity. As a matter of fact, there is much disagreement on the precise dates of the beginning and end of modernity. There appears to be general consensus on its meaning and social formations. ADVERTISEMENTS: In a broader way, modernity is associated with the following: 1. Industrialization and urbanization. 2. Development. Modernity typically refers to a post-traditional, post-medieval historical period, one marked by the move from feudalism (or agrarianism) toward capitalism, industrialization, secularization, rationalization, the nation-state and its constituent institutions and forms of surveillance (Barker 2005, 444). Phases of modernity. According to one of Marshall Berman's books (Berman 1983,[page needed]), modernity is periodized into three conventional phases (dubbed Modernity, a topic in the humanities and social sciences, is both a historical period (the modern era) and the ensemble of particular socio-cultural norms, attitudes and practices that arose in the wake of the Renaissance in the "Age of Reason" of 17th-century thought and the 18th-century "Enlightenment". Depending on the field, "modernity" may refer to different time periods or qualities.