Shaping the Discourse on Modernity

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Abstract

In this opening article, the editors of *History, Culture and Modernity* provide an overview of recent debates relating to "modernity", inviting prospective authors to participate in a reflexive conversation on this contested concept, which is, at the same time, a practical reality. Modernity is on endless trial, suggesting evaluation and permanent criticism. The most disputed aspects of modernity range from its supposedly secular character and its strong connection to western science. Responses to these and other conspicuous features of modernity include Romanticism and various critiques of Enlightenment rationality, but also artistic modernism and the postcolonial attack on Eurocentrism. New approaches to the study of modernity try to accept its ambiguity, rather than reaffirm the conventional binary approach, and pay more attention to global and experiential aspects. A cultural history of modernity can help to expand such new approaches.

Keywords: modernism, postcolonialism, experience, religion, Enlightenment, science

A phrase borrowed from the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, "Modernity on endless trial", captures the aims the new *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity* has set itself.[1] The expression has a fine double take. It carries with it a notion of evaluation, of permanent criticism, of intellectual debate on modernity. And, it suggests work in progress, intimating that modernity is made and experienced by trial and error. Modernity, as Kolakowski's catchy phrase implies, is the world we have to cope with. Modernity is not just a discourse; it is a contested concept and, at the same time, a real practical effort. The ideas and theories we want to

address in this journal are never free-floating intellectual artefacts; they confront real situations and actual dilemmas. The sometimes precarious balance between history and theory, discourse and practice, reality and critique, characterises the reflexive conversation *HCM* wants to open. Reflexivity, we believe, necessarily entails constantly moving, back and forth, between research and analysis in order to participate in topical debates. That is the reason why "modernity" flies on the masthead of this journal. *HCM* conceives of modernity, first, as the cultural space in which the strands of thought on past, present and future are woven together and, second, as the intellectual tool that enables us to engage and understand this cultural fabric.

HCM has no intention of narrowing down the many possible meanings modernity can have. On the contrary, it is precisely the debate on the nature of modernity and its sundry manifestations, hopes, accomplishments, problems, tensions, exclusions, failures and futures that we want to facilitate. *HCM* focuses on culture. This is not, however, to exclude other understandings of the phenomena that constitute modernity. On the contrary, this journal will thankfully make use of the rich fund of economic, social and political analysis that has been produced over the years. Crucial to *HCM*'s approach is that it considers these and other interpretations of modernity to be part of a discourse in which remnants of structural-functionalist modernisation theories remain virulent. While it is important to recognise that cultural analyses have not been immune to the lure of teleology, we do think that cultural interpretations can help to countervail deterministic accounts. To do justice to historical complexities and to underline its cultural approach to modernity, *HCM* concentrates on people making sense of their surroundings, articulating new meanings, cherishing uncertain customs, performing disputed pasts, expressing untested critiques, forcing breaks and ruptures, addressing complexities, nursing novel attitudes, and generally giving shape to modern values in unprecedented, practical situations.

To be able to contribute to the ongoing debate on history, culture, and modernity, *HCM* methodologically envisages a form of reflexive cultural history combining theoretical analysis with empirical research. The journal will act as a platform and testing ground for new approaches and unorthodox ideas while offering a forum for contributions dealing with the culture of modernity in any of its many possible configurations. *HCM* embraces a broad conception of cultural history. Consequently, the journal welcomes contributions by sociologists, anthropologists and philosophers, as well as input from cultural studies and media studies. No topic is out of bounds, as long as it has a bearing on the cultural dimensions of modernity. And

to enable what we hope will be a fruitful and truly global discussion, *HCM* has chosen to appear as a free, open-access journal available to everyone within reach of the World Wide Web.

Disputed Origins

One influential tale of the origin of modernity highlights industrialisation, technology, urbanisation and individualisation. Many cultural historians in the West have implicitly taken this socio-economic assessment of the past as a natural background to write narratives centred around Enlightenment notions such as universalism, cosmopolitanism, freedom, equality, emancipation, and so on. The story usually unfolds like this. The advent of modernity was heralded by what Eduard Jan Dijksterhuis called the "mechanization of the world picture" or, alternatively, by the surge in occidental scepticism described by Richard Popkin, or by Paul Hazard's *Crise de la Conscience Européenne*, the moment in European history when "the moderns" shattered the dominion of classical tradition.[2] In so far as the world could be understood, it became a mechanism, both rationally comprehensible and empirically researchable, answering obediently to the laws of classical physics. Here, according to the narrative, begins the painstaking, gradual accumulation of insights called the "scientific revolution", but also the rise of the "Enlightenment". Reason and scepticism undermined the revelations treasured by the clerical caste since time immemorial. Knowledge was no longer understood to be revealed in sacred scriptures or transmitted by timeless authorities, but was henceforth carefully reasoned out by fallible humans.

This powerful account of the (eventual) triumph of rationalism and freedom has been, and still is, alluring. It is a vibrant narrative that frames modernity as a mindset and a social project, the origins of which are clearly localised in Enlightenment Europe. It appeals to historians because the story is organised chronologically and sketches a clear development over time. But perhaps the story is too good to be true. In the course of two centuries, more than one alternative version of modernity's biography has been written. These different tales about the roots and trajectories of modernity challenge the dominant narrative, rejecting its unreflective, self-congratulatory bias, its European provincialism, its teleological character, and its claim to fulfil its own prophecy.

In what follows, we will approach modernity, as it were, from the "outside", by seeing it as a discourse and practice demanding constant

revaluation, rather than as the inevitable outcome of a historical development. This essay is organised around recurrent problems and debates; it attempts to address modernity as a series of contested concepts, upsetting practices and disturbing experiences. The various strands of modernity do not replace one another, but continually enhance, enrich, adapt, change and undermine each other. Within modernity we see neither Foucauldian epistemic ruptures, nor a Kuhnian incommensurability of paradigms. We attempt to comprehend the history of modernity in terms both of the past as it emerges from the sources and of our own present-day concerns, by interpreting history in relation to our own self-understanding, thus enabling us to grasp the different takes on modern culture and actively engage with the discourse on modernity. The following account is hardly exhaustive. It offers a selection of problems and is intended as a cursory glance at some of the themes and debates that might be fruitful for *HCM*.

Modernity on Trial 1: Questioning Secularism

Firmly rooted in the Enlightenment, modernity in its dominant version is portrayed as fundamentally non-religious. A case in point is Jonathan Israel's attribution of the "making of modernity" to a profoundly secular Enlightenment modelled on the philosophy of Spinoza; in his *Taming the Gods*, Ian Buruma accepts "radical" Enlightenment as the only possible one. They (and many others) strongly advocate secularism in public debates. Their narrative implies that only a liberal state can guarantee human rights and curb religious fervour. Postmodern thinkers, although deploring enlightened reason as a harmful if not disastrous fetish, have made a similar connection between modernity and secularism. But these views seem to be based less on sound scholarship than on their relevance to current debates on the foundations of society. Even if we leave out of consideration the bewildering array of Enlightenments launched over the past few decades, variously called "moderate", "conservative" or "national", and qualified by epithets ranging from Lockean and Kantian to French, English, Danish, German, Spanish, Brazilian and Japanese, we would still need to take into account "religious" Enlightenments, and not just those in the western world.[3] Which Enlightenment, then, led to which modernity?

The debate on European Enlightenment and secular modernity is as long-standing as it is irresolvable. But it does raise fundamental questions worth thinking about. To what extent was the eighteenth-century Enlightenment secular? And if the Enlightenment was not fundamentally secular,

to what extent is modernity, as its progeny, inherently opposed to religion? Those who criticise the idea of Enlightenment secularism claim that it was never adhered to by more than a tiny handful of controversialists of a materialistic or, at best, deistic inclination, whose combined influence was practically negligible and has at any rate remained unproven to date.[4] If this is true, then the real roots of secular modernity lie not in the eighteenth but in the nineteenth century. Indeed, many scholars of European Christendom would want to argue that secularisation was very much a twentieth-century trend, reaching back no more than five decades or so.[5] In fact, secularism itself has been identified as a modern form of "fundamentalism", although perhaps this is stretching the definition of religion rather too much.

It is relatively easy to trace the roots of some form of non-secular modernity to the eighteenth century. For was this not the age in which elite salons and private associations gave rise to the "civil society", that elusive space between public authority and the domestic sphere associated with modernity by thinkers as diverse as Alexis de Tocqueville, Antonio Gramsci, and Jürgen Habermas? The point here is that in the eighteenth century emphatically religious phenomena like Pietism may well have been crucial in helping to carve out this modern "public sphere". Nor would it be difficult to argue that the effect of popular religious traditions on, say, religious tolerance was exponentially larger than the likes of Voltaire would have cared to imagine. The whole point about religion, in contrast to the cerebral "Enlightenment" of the free-thinking elite, is that idea and practice, doctrine and ritual, tend to be pretty much integrated. From a global rather than European perspective, all sorts of people "do" religion; and the new convention among anthropologists has it that religion is an everyday material practice in which the larger part of humanity has dabbled seriously since time immemorial. The era of modernity, by implication, is not and cannot be a deviation from this pattern.[6]

If we stick to the narrative still dominant in the West (or at least in Europe) and claim that religion and modernity are at opposite extremes, we run the risk of (dis)qualifying most people in the world today as non-modern. The much-disputed linkage between religion and modernity thus raises the question of European singularity. Does the perceived relevance of religion to global modernity amount to wishful thinking on the part of hopeful religionists and relativistic anthropologists? Is the idea of secular modernity the hang-up of failed believers and crusading atheists travelling blindfold on a putative European *Sonderweg*, the temporary nature of which is underscored by the very processes of immigration and globalisation to which Europe itself is currently subject? The identification of modernity

with secular Enlightenment certainly underestimates the pliability and malleability of religion, or at least the ability of the religiously inclined to adapt and appropriate aspects of modernity. In the minds of believers there is, in any case, no contradiction between believing in God and subscribing to quantum physics, or going to a Buddhist temple and living in a skyscraper in downtown Shanghai.

Modernity on Trial 2: The Disenchantment of the World

Perhaps the nineteenth century confronts us with fewer ambiguities than the eighteenth. And perhaps this is where the true roots of modernity lie; for did not the Industrial Revolution and the Age of Science reflect the real triumph of modernity? The cultural impact of science and technology was evidently huge, not least in the organisation and institutionalisation of knowledge. Two principal concepts on which this era based its claim to fame were evolution and positivism.

Before evolution had become a key concept in biology it was already a staple metaphor in sociology. Herbert Spencer is, in this respect, no less significant than Charles Darwin or Alfred Russel Wallace – it may well be the case that Darwin could "see" evolution only because it had been established as a paradigmatic view beforehand. In anthropology and psychology the idea of cultural evolution had become common enough. In economic theory, versions of the *Stufenlehre* (phases of economic growth) made their entry, where they would remain even after Walt Whitman Rostow wrote his general theory on the five *Stages of Economic Growth* (1960). Hegel and Marx may have understood history in terms of dialectical clashes but the final result of their histories was a development in stages nonetheless. The evolutionism invoked by Marxist revisionists like Eduard Bernstein in the late nineteenth century did not differ in principle; it was only a more gradual view of the same deterministic historical process. Meanwhile, positivism was hailed as the true method used by science to discover and map the laws of development and thus produce reliable knowledge. Given to measuring and counting, Nicolas de Condorcet, Saint-Simon, Jeremy Bentham and Auguste Comte designed social doctrines grounded in mathematics. This way of thinking, an absolute "trust in numbers", became the dominant mode of thinking and acting in state planning since Napoleonic times.[7]

Scientific rationalism comprises a very powerful strand of modern thought and practice. It appeared in all "modern" empires, colonies, and nation states, from Britain through Tanganyika to China. And it readily

combined and recombined during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with socialist utopianism as well as liberal politics and capitalist enterprise. But this version of modernity came at a cost: that of disenchantment, to use Max Weber's term for the definitive loss of a unitary worldview. Once science became disentangled from ideology – communism is a case in point – things began to "fall apart", to paraphrase Chinua Achebe (who, in turn, quoted the Irish modernist William Butler Yeats).[8] For to cope with this kind of modernity meant to live in an uncompromisingly relativistic universe, in a civil society where people had to deal with incommensurable differences, with what Weber called the "polytheism of values" that characterised the "eternal struggle of the gods". Much could be solved within the bounds of bourgeois propriety, but the price paid by the world for the welfare and progress brought on by scientific rationalism was moral shallowness, suspension of belief, self-protective irony, even cynicism.[9] Cracks had begun to appear in the smooth cast of modernity even before the mould was dry. But again, not everyone would be easily persuaded to grant that there may be alternatives to liberalism and capitalism in the way they emerged in the West – two decades ago, there was even some discussion about the end of history and the last man.

Modernity on Trial 3: The Romantic Challenge

In reaction to modernity's propensity to bring about the disintegration and fragmentation signalled by Weber, critics within the Romantic tradition refocused on unity and "wholeness".[10] They sought to sublimate reason into spirit, to revitalise matter and reaffirm inequalities, and to conflate the self and the universe in a modern *coincidentia oppositorum*. Rousseau sought to integrate the individual into society; Marx strove to end alienation; Durkheim embarked on a sociological project to restore community. Inculcating people with civic virtue (forcibly, if necessary) would bring back the kinship that had been lost. It is a communitarian ideal that is still with us. Modernity, in this view, is rooted as much in the Enlightenment as in its antipode, the Counter-Enlightenment, and both draw on older traditions which are not in themselves incontrovertibly or uniquely "Western". What the proponents of secular modernity have often called "anti-modernity", ranging widely from romanticism and revivalism to fascism and flower power, was not the conservative backlash of those unable to cope with the realities of modernity; it was part and parcel of modernity itself.

Romanticism, in this interpretation, is not so much the antipode as the counterpart of the Enlightenment. Some would argue that insofar as modernity was an Enlightenment "project", it has been a dismal human failure. They point out that the ethical guidelines and moral grounding indispensable to political reflection (not to mention political action) are to be found in spiritual and metaphysical traditions, whatever their origins. The pursuit of oneness is characteristic of mystical traditions, not just in Western Christianity, but in Sufism, Hinduism, and Daoism. In some of its contemporary manifestations there is a curious link between the appeal to spirituality and attempts to overcome the body/mind divide, to transcend the "Enlightenment" rift between nature and culture, to close the Cartesian gap between human consciousness and the course of the cosmos. To these devotees of today's "beyondisms", the twenty-first century holds the promise of a science-based return to mystical holism. Their aim is to inaugurate the final synthesis of Enlightenment and romanticism, and consequently the closure of modernity.

The nineteenth century has often been called the age of history and in this sense, too, it is foundational to the modern period. Some scholars understand modern historicity as the consequence of a new paradigm shift or even as an epistemic break. However, modern historical consciousness is, to a large extent, simply an enhancement of the mechanistic, Newtonian world view. The idea of development over time made the universe dynamic, process-oriented and full of potential, auguring desirable futures that could be attained through successive stages of increasing refinement. This, again, is an optimistic, teleological story of progress involving a dynamic perspective of time. However, as "historicism" developed into the disciplinary matrix of nineteenth-century scholarship, it eventually turned into a kind of romantic anti-positivism. Critics voiced conservative regrets about the loss of old worlds and entertained fundamental doubts about self-evident progress and deterministic evolution. Ultimately, the realisation that the past was gone, never to return, became part of the modern condition itself.

Modernity on Trial 4: Modernist Critique

Disillusionment concerning the promise of modernity became even more apparent around 1900. Scholars have charted the rise of sceptical, reflexive modernity at length.[11] One expression of disappointment was the so-called "revolt against positivism" engendered around 1890 by a famous generation of European intellectuals, including Sigmund Freud and Max Weber. Doubts

about evolution and progress could translate into a preoccupation with biological degeneration and spiritual decadence, as in Cesare Lombroso's work on inherited criminality and Oswald Spengler's on civilisational decline. On the practical level, the price of cultural disenchantment and political disillusionment translated, once again, into a "hunger for wholeness" reminiscent of romanticism,[12] but now relying on a combination of radicalised nationalism and social Darwinism. Survival of, and leadership by, the fittest became a leading tenet in the minds of those who attempted to transcend or do away with positivism. Arthur de Gobineau's racialism and Lombroso's criminology can both be seen as instances of positivism run amok; later writers concerned with cultural or genetic supremacy often ended up vulgarising Charles Darwin and Friedrich Nietzsche. The price of self-acclaimed superiority was a mixture of self-absorption and exclusionist thinking strangely at odds with the universalist claims and aspirations of the Enlightenment tradition.

Mainstream cultural critics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries responded to the "disenchantment of the world" by attempts to re-enchant it, appealing to old or new religions, to imagined communities, and to invented traditions and reconstructed pasts.[13] Along with utopian thinkers and political ideologists, the avant-garde, by contrast, risked the perilous leap into the future. While the founders of modern ideology drew up detailed marching orders, the avant-garde opened up the future, rescuing it from the chains of causality forced on the past, the present and the future. "We want to exalt movements of aggression, feverish sleeplessness, the double march, the perilous leap, the slap and the blow with the fist", wrote poet and self-proclaimed social nuisance Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in the 1909 founding manifesto of the Italian Futurist movement. What the artistic and literary avant-gardes of Europe expressed time and again, was the disrupting character of modernity: they proclaimed rupture instead of progress, shock instead of enlightenment. In doing so, they were ready to "revaluate all values" (Nietzsche) in art and life. Although not all manifestations of the avant-garde were equally bellicose, they shared a passion for making a clean sweep, for redefining the fundamentals of culture and society. The avant-garde challenged modernity, not by rejecting the changes it brought about, but by dismissing the mental and spiritual laziness and inertia that accompanied it.

Ironically, these avant-garde attempts to liberate the future by breaking with the past have been historicised by (art) critics and (art) historians. Indeed, the paradoxical integration of breaches and interruptions into the mainstream narrative of progressive, teleological modernity continues to

force new generations of avant-gardists to devise new strategies of shock, slap and punch. Meanwhile, artists all over the world have been coping with the experience of rupture brought about by the social, political, cultural and everyday consequences of global modernisation. They have done so in various ways, depending on the socio-political environment in which they worked. Some were forced to dutifully translate political ideology into visual, musical or literary form, as was the case of those who contributed to Soviet socialist realism, Nazi art or the *hong-guang-liang* (red-smooth-glowing) style of China's Cultural Revolution. Others have had to deal with a complex and delicate balance between state interests and artistic vision, such as the Mexican muralists of the 1920s and 1930s. Their work would form a crucial source of inspiration for twentieth-century political street art and artistic counter-culture worldwide. Thus, artists beyond the European pale were equally radical and demanding in the manner in which they came to terms with modernity. They only differed from their European counterparts in using an artistic vocabulary that made sense in their own specific cultural context.

Modernity on Trial 5: On the Ruins of Twentieth-Century Society

The modernist critique of the avant-garde was enhanced by the First and Second World Wars, generating a wider intellectual climate of cultural pessimism that was especially prominent in Europe. For Europeans, the Great War was the mother of all catastrophes (*die Mutterkatastrophe*, in German). Their reactions to the atrocities to which the war gave rise varied.

Part of the generation that lost its future in the trenches abhorred the world of their nineteenth-century fathers. They raged against bourgeois hypocrisy and loathed what modernity in their eyes stood for: liberalism, rationalism, progress, democracy. Confronted with the impossibility, politically and intellectually, of replacing modern society with the harmonious community they projected onto an idealised past, a group of German radicals operating under the label of the *konservative Revolution* resorted to what Fritz Stern has aptly called "cultural despair". More menacing and more effective, however, was fascism, since it wielded modern tools of power. Culturally, fascism's stance towards modern society was ambivalent. On the one hand, it displayed an affinity with some of the doctrines and symbols of the Counter Enlightenment. On the other hand, fascism as well as National Socialism were themselves modern in more ways than one.

Italian fascism, as already mentioned, flirted with the artistic avant-garde of the Futurists, while National Socialism made use of the pseudo-science of racism and organised the Holocaust according to the principles of modern bureaucracy and industrial efficiency.[14]

In Europe, humanistic responses to the crisis of modern society include the Frankfurt School's well-known critique of Enlightenment rationality. Members of the school distanced themselves from Marx's promise of automatic progress and took their cue from Weber's and Freud's critique of the "iron cage" of rationalism. One classic expression of this fundamental doubt was the publication, in 1947, of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Another confrontation with a liberal society gone foul was the existentialism of such mid-twentieth-century philosophers as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir. To be sure, second-generation members of the Frankfurt School, notably Jürgen Habermas as well as many French existentialists, returned to the defence of the Enlightenment project. This did not, however, relieve their basic disillusionment with modernity. Heirs to their disappointment were the poststructuralist thinkers of the 1970s. Styling themselves as post-humanists, they too expressed a deep-rooted suspicion of modern, liberal promises.[15]

Not everyone saw the fatal lapses in twentieth-century European history as a consequence of rationalism run wild. Some explained the crisis of European civilisation in terms of the wholesale rejection of rational thought and behaviour as such. What was needed to counter the seduction of totalitarian ideologies, they believed, was more modernity. But this time modernity had to be the real thing; it had to be shorn of all irrational emotions, political passions and cultural exuberance. Reviving utilitarianism, they advocated a sensible society that could act as a remedy for the cultural despair that had paradoxically brought about political hubris on an unprecedented scale. Attempts at cautiously resurrecting the dream of Reason boiled down to piecemeal engineering and an "end of ideology" along pragmatic lines. The logical empiricism of the *Wiener Kreis* and the critical rationalism of Karl Popper can be classified not only as epistemological rescue operations for modern science, but also as ideologically motivated attempts to renew liberalism. The revitalisation of liberalism and pragmatic nationalism was highly successful in the *trente glorieuses* between 1945 and 1975. The forging of "heavy modernity", to borrow Zygmunt Bauman's description, was accompanied by huge educational and social programmes. The latter have recently been contested in fierce debates on citizenship in response to mass immigration and the crumbling welfare state. In the past two decades,

new perspectives have been offered by theoreticians like Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens in discussing the environmental threats confronting the late modern "risk society" and in debating the need to forge a new kind of political trust. Underlining the interdependency of the local and the global and the need to develop new tools for responsible politics, they have urged us to transcend the Eurocentric narrative.[16]

Modernity on Trial 6: Embodied Modernity

Modernity is not just a matter of ideas put into practice, of knowing and doing; modernity is also experienced. This dimension of modernity was first foregrounded by the French romantic poet Charles Baudelaire. For him, the modern referred to "the transient, the fleeting, the contingent" as experienced by the *flâneur* in the modern metropolis. The *flâneur* observed the city's ever changing images of the new and the fashionable, while feeling both anxiety and exhilaration, thus giving vent to the sense of ambivalence that has been a hallmark of the modern metropolitan setting.[17] Similarly, Walter Benjamin underlined the new types of identity and modes of human interiority originating in urban modernity. Visual experiences, in his view, combined with commodity capitalism to produce a "phantasmagoria" or dream state, culminating in the new arcades and department stores. Sociologist Georg Simmel also probed the modern city's socio-psychological impact on the urban dweller's self and pointed to the depersonalising features of urban modernity. Together, Baudelaire, Benjamin and Simmel paved the way for a characterisation of modernity as fleeting, ambivalent and inducing feelings of uncertainty, what Zygmunt Bauman has termed "liquid modernity".[18]

Highlighting the experiential aspects of modernity has also raised questions in regard to the gendered nature of modernity[19] and of nineteenth-century sociological discourse. The latter is now regarded as pervaded by the idea of woman as pre-modern, the female figuring as a refuge of maternal comfort and wholeness in contrast to modernised fragmentation.[20] Incorporating the feeling body into the history of modernity implies questioning gendered assumptions of discourses on modernity, but also searching for human agency. To what extent could men and women protest against the use of their bodies as commodities and the alienation this implied, as noted by Marx, or resist the discipline exerted on their bodies, which is foundational to modern power according to Michel Foucault? Scholars who view modernity from this perspective have paid attention to

embodied cultural practices, emphasising performances in varying social settings. Sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu, Erving Goffman and Richard Sennett have laid out the differentiating roles modern individuals play in cities, at home and at work.[21] Judith Butler has analysed the constitutive life scripts of gender and sexuality that strongly influence human behaviour.[22] Whereas postmodern approaches brought to light the cultural construction of the body, recent research has called for more attention to "embodiment": to the material and physical acting out of cultural norms and to experiential aspects beyond the grip of culture.[23]

Modernity on Trial 7: Provincialising (European) Modernity

For most scholars in the western world, modernity is rooted in Europe. "World" or "global" historians discuss the moment when Europe began to take the lead and catapulted the world into the modern unknown. According to some, Europe's dominance can be perfectly explained utilising the dominant narrative of modernity based on the well-known sequence of Renaissance, Reformation, Scientific Revolution, Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution. Others point to the emergence of universities and freethinkers during the high middle ages, if not to classical antiquity as the cradle of Western civilisation. Implied in either view is the idea that Europe, or more generally speaking the West, at one point in time or another became a role model for the rest of the world.

The debate is, of course, more complex than this. While there is a general consensus about the actual dominance of the Western world during the past two centuries, at least in terms of political power and economic impact, opinions differ widely as to how Western hegemony itself should be understood. According to the traditional teleological view, restated by Francis Fukuyama in the wake of "1989", the Western model of liberal democracy and free-market capitalism has proven itself superior to all other models of socio-economic organisation. Following this logic, it is only a matter of time before the rest of the world will conform to the Western standard unless, of course, humanity proves to be unable to check its impulse to violence, if not self-destruction.[24]

Scholars and critics have signalled fundamental flaws in Fukuyama's view. His teleological model does not, for instance, account for the large-scale human rights violations in modern and contemporary European and American history, including colonial exploitation and "scientific" racism. Moreover, it is highly problematic to deny the qualification "modern"

to non-liberal ideologies and political traditions. Even if one defines modernity in terms of a utopian belief in material and moral progress, it is still evident that socialism, fascism and religious fundamentalism are all essentially modern in spite of defining progress in radically different terms.[25] Thus, the teleological view has been fiercely criticised by historians of socialism, claiming that Eastern European countries developed their own routes towards modernity. Highlighting the structural parallels and cultural exchanges between East and West during the Cold War, they have falsified the binary opposition between Western progress and non-Western backwardness in the process.[26]

Post-colonial theorists have, in turn, criticised the power structures inherent in European colonial history. Edward Said used Michel Foucault's analysis of the correspondence between systems of knowledge and the legitimisation of power to unveil Western Orientalism as an attempt to define, control and dominate the Middle East. The Orient, defined in binary opposition to the West, supported the European sense of cultural supremacy. Meanwhile, as Gayatri Spivak and others pointed out, the epistemological dominance of the West implied that "subaltern" people were practically forced to express themselves in accordance with the worldview of the colonisers, depriving them of the possibility to speak with their own voice. In a similar vein, Dipesh Chakrabarty argued that "Europe", understood not as a geographical or social reality but as a concept defining the Western standard of political modernisation, remained firmly in place, explicitly or implicitly, as a silent referent in many or most accounts of global modern history. Instead, Chakrabarty suggested a perspective that "provincialised" Europe and allowed for a multiplicity of different but equally valuable modernities.[27]

This escape from a politically charged Eurocentrism is not, however, universally accepted. For example, Gurminder Bhambra has criticised the idea of "multiple" or "alternative" modernities because the very concept of modernity uses Europe as implicit point of reference. Arif Dirlik rejects multiple or alternative modernities as an essentialist ploy that conceals the dynamics and power struggles of modern life behind a homogenised notion of culture. Dirlik's own solution is to view modernity in terms of interaction, instead of separate cultures with their own varieties of modernity. His perspective resembles that of Homi Bhabha, who has similarly denounced the "culturalist" fixation on distinct socio-cultural entities in a globalised world. Instead, Bhabha proposes an understanding of the modern condition in terms of cultural complexity, ambiguity and hybridity.[28]

Beyond Modernity?

The twenty-first century has seen the arrival of modern "beyondisms". Can we break free from the "iron cage" of modernity and rationalism, to cite Weber again? Can we do away with the split between mind and matter or between nature and culture that has confined European thinking from Descartes onwards? Intellectual manifestations of this critique are the emerging idea of new materialism and the very negation of modernity itself, as in Bruno Latour's contention that we have never been modern, since modernity's claims have never really been achieved. In his view, we have been stuck with hybrids, muddled mixtures of modern and pre-modern thought.[29]

A similar ambiguity involves the presumed secular nature of modernity. It could well be the case that the much-vaunted worldwide "resurgence of religion" is the result of politicised movements with a feel for the media, or the consequence of closer academic scrutiny in the wake of the cultural turn. But if it is not, then the "post-secular age" identified by (among others) Habermas has indeed arrived. Rather than attempting to reconvert the world to religion, those who take the post-secular stance argue that it is impossible to separate faith-based reasoning from public reason. The one is integrated into, and depends on, the other. Perhaps this juggling of incompatibles, this uneasy marriage between the religious and the secular, is the kind of paradox that characterises modernity best.

Arguably, these and other strands of modern thought and practice stay within the framework of modernity. This applies even to the recent "beyondisms", however critical these may seem. All are part of a continuous but ambivalent discourse. The overall pattern is one of belief in some of the promises of rationalism; a belief, however, that is accompanied by fundamental doubts about, and disappointments with, liberal politics, rational social practices and secular culture, which in turn spills over in a distrust of science and scholarship. The wording and the timing of the debates may vary. Debates surface in one context a decade later than elsewhere; in many instances the critics are marginalised, in some cases they are victorious. But the issues at hand are recognisable across time and place. *HCM* invites scholars from all over the world to take part in an ongoing conversation on the complexities of modernity.

Notes

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