Modernity
International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences
Ed. William A. Darity, Jr.. Vol. 5. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2008.
p230-232.

When Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) undertook to promote “new modes and orders” unlike those that had previously existed, he was expressing a historical vision that came to define modernity (from the late Latin modernus, derivative of the classical Latin modo, meaning “just now” or “in a certain manner”). This vision was one shared in diverse ways by other founders of modernity such as Francis Bacon (1561–1626), Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), and René Descartes (1596–1650), as well as world explorers of the period and leaders of the Protestant Reformation. From politics and science to philosophy and religion, an influential cadre argued for the possibility of introducing an historical break as significant as any that had preceded it, although they also often made the case for this break as a kind of return to lost traditions of antiquity. That Machiavelli is considered a founder of a new form of political science indicates the significance of this vision for the social sciences. Indeed, modernity gave rise both to the kinds of societies or social relations studied by the field as well as to widespread notions about what it means to practice science. Yet it is an ambivalent term. Modernity can denote different historical periods and phenomena, and it is celebrated and reviled for a variety of reasons. It has multiple meanings that inform debates about the human condition and the nature of the social sciences. This is especially true at the dawn of what many theorists describe as the “postmodern age.”

GENERAL FEATURES OF MODERNITY

Three essential features of the modern era set it apart from premodern ways of life. First, modernity refers to radical societal changes, including the rise of democracies, the spread of religious pluralism and secularization, the European colonization of other parts of the world, the formation of the bureaucratic nation-state and market economies, increased social mobility and literacy, and the growth of industrial society with all the attendant changes in working conditions. Modernity is characterized by advanced technoindustrial society, which has brought gains in material well-being primarily to the developed (or modernized) parts of the world. Indeed, a central motif of modernity is the notion of unlimited progress. Yet it is also characterized by uniquely modern problems such as the environmental risks associated with technologies. Many social theorists argue that the emerging knowledge or information age constitutes a novel, postmodern society.

Second, modernity is characterized by a growing emphasis on reason and experience, which speaks to the rise of modern science and technology. Most importantly, modern science altered what it means to know. In the prologue to the never-completed work The Great Instauration, Bacon first made the radical argument that “human knowledge and human power meet in one.” Complaining of the vain speculations of earlier philosophers, Bacon argued that knowledge should lead to “the conquest of nature for the relief of man's estate” (Novum Organum, 1620, LII). Unlike the ancients, for whom

theory was about things eternal, modern thinkers promoted a more practical science concerned with altering the changeable. This alliance between knowing and changing the world is rooted in the modern subject/object dualism first articulated by Descartes.

Third, modernity ushered in new understandings of the human self and political community, which reflected and conditioned these social and cultural changes. Modern theorists such as Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) conceptualized the self as a reflexive, autonomous, and rational will, freely choosing its ends and projecting its values onto an indifferent nature that is void of purpose. Political association is cast less as the common pursuit for higher ends (the "perfectionism" of ancient political theorists) than as procedures for adjudicating demands within a framework of individual rights and freedoms. C. B. Macpherson named this political aspect of modernity "possessive individualism" (1962).

SPECIFIC MEANINGS OF MODERNITY

Modernity should be set within specific contexts, insofar as it is used to describe different periods of history and aspects of life. Indeed, there are numerous features associated with "being modern," which have been developed in several fields of study. For example, "modern art" refers to works produced in the period from the late nineteenth century to the 1970s, a time characterized in part by the abandonment of earlier emphases on representationalism and religious iconography. A related term is modernism, which also has multiple meanings, but is often used to refer to cultural movements composed of "modernists" who embrace the features of modern life identified above. Bruce Lawrence, for example, characterizes many religious fundamentalists as modern because they take advantage of technological advances (Lawrence 1989). But they are not modernists, because they reject the fundamental philosophical underpinnings of modernity and refuse to wholly adapt their personal identities and social lives to the dictates of the modern world. At its extreme, this rejection of modernity has led to terrorist acts.

A few prominent uses of modernity from philosophy and social science indicate its multiplicity. Karl Marx (1818–1883) emphasized the alienation of humankind under modern capitalist systems and envisioned communism as an emancipating force. Indeed, alienation is one predominant motif in critical theories of modernity. For example, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) suggested that the essence of modernity is "the death of God." For Nietzsche, the modern worldview necessitates that "the highest values devaluate themselves. The aim is lacking: 'why?' finds no answer" (Nietzsche [1901] 1967, p. 9). He argued that each individual should mold his or her own values as the pure expression of selfhood, ignoring traditions about good and evil. In modernity, what was once thought of as transcendent and given becomes the unstable product of the human will. Marx summarized this radical historical contingency: "all that is solid melts into air" ([1848] 1994). Critical approaches to modern society thus often focus on securing personal orientation and meaning, frequently through spiritual or communal practices.

Auguste Comte (1798–1857) described the modern era as the culmination of a three-stage historical process, which is itself a characteristically modern interpretation of history in its linear, progressive outlook. The scientific or "positive" stage transcends the earlier "theological" and "metaphysical" stages. For Comte, the methods of the natural sciences provide the only route to certain knowledge. In a more pessimistic account, Max Weber (1864–1920) argued that the rationalization of life in modern society traps individuals in an "iron cage" of rule-based control. Similarly, Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929) criticized the modern notion of subject-centered reason by developing theories of communicative rationality. Peter Wagner explained such conflicting interpretations by arguing that modernity is ambiguous in presenting two counterposed metanarratives—liberation and disciplinization (1994). Michel Foucault (1926–1984) did much to highlight the latter dimension of modernity by arguing that modern society involves pervasive systems of control and surveillance, which has informed many theories critical of development and globalization. He argued that modernity possesses certain underlying conditions of rationality that constitute an understanding of the world and define what counts as truth. Similarly, Martin Heidegger (1899–1976) argued that modernity is a unique way of revealing and being in the world, which he called Gestell ("enframing"). For Heidegger, modern human existence is constituted by a technological approach to the world.

Work in feminist epistemology and the sociology of science has further refined critiques of modern rationality. Thomas Kuhn (1922–1996), for example, argued that scientific advance is not the steady polishing of the mirror of nature leading to a correspondence with reality "in itself." Rather, science is a community endeavor in which groups define common problems and standards. Kuhn's work ushered in a variety of postmodern approaches to science and theories of our linguistically mediated existence. Indeed, all of the thinkers mentioned here have spurred thought about various alternatives to modernity. In one of the most provocative of such accounts, Bruno Latour (b. 1947) argued that "we have never been modern," meaning that we have never been able to sustain the conceptual categories or the binary types, especially those of "nature" and "culture," posited by the modern worldview. The harder we try to purify our world into distinct, bounded domains, the more intermediary forms proliferate.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bacon, Francis. [c. 1620] 1994. Novum Organum; with Other Parts of the Great Instauration. Chicago: Open Court.

Bauman, Zygmunt. 1991. Modernity and Ambivalence. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Giddens, Anthony. 1991. Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Hirschman, Albert. 1977. The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before Its Triumph. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Latour, Bruno. 1993. We Have Never Been Modern. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Lawrence, Bruce. 1989. Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt Against the Modern Age. San Francisco: Harper and Row.
Macpherson, C. B. 1962. The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke. Oxford: Clarendon.
Marx, Karl, and Frederick Engels. [1848] 1948. Manifesto of the Communist Party. New York: International Publishers.
Nietzsche, Friedrich. [1901] 1967. The Will to Power. Ed. Walter Kaufman. New York: Vintage Books.
Taylor, Charles. 1989. Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Turner, Bryan S., ed. 1990. Theories of Modernity and Postmodernity. London: Sage.
Wagner, Peter. 1994. A Sociology of Modernity: Liberty and Discipline. London: Routledge.
Adam Briggle
Source Citation (MLA 7th Edition)
"Modernity." International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences. Ed. William A. Darity, Jr. 2nd ed. Vol. 5. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2008. 230-232. Gale Virtual Reference Library. Web. 5 Feb. 2013.