Modernity

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Modernity and modernization both derive from the postclassical Latin adjective *modernus*, meaning "of today," "current." The adjective appeared in the early Middle Ages, largely in connection with church affairs, and the noun *modernitas* in the High Middle Ages. The concept testifies to the particular importance of and veneration for Greco-Roman antiquity and ancient knowledge, institutions, and art in European culture. "The modern" and "modernity" developed in contrast to "ancient" and "antiquity." Their counterpositioning to "traditional" and "traditions" was largely established only after World War II.

Classical sociology, and social science generally, were strongly focused on distinguishing their contemporary society from the past. But their contrasts were not conceptualized in terms of modernity and premodernity. The only social classic scholar who used the adjective "modern" (not the noun "modernity") was Karl Marx. In the first eight pages of the *Communist Manifesto* there are 12 references to "modern" phenomena, from "modern bourgeois society" and "modern big industry," via "modern state power" to "the modern workers, the proletarians." In his Preface to the first edition of *Capital*, Marx says that its "ultimate purpose" is "to disclose the economic law of motion of modern society." But it was not a Marxian key concept, and until the 1980s and Marshal Berman's (1982) work, Marx was virtually unknown as a theorist of the modern.

In spite of their common genealogy, the contemporary concepts and theories of modernity and modernization developed in very different ways, and with only brief and tenuous contacts with each other. After the Middle Ages the semantic field of the modern was dominated by aesthetics and the arts. The first major use of it was a French late seventeenth-century debate, La querelle des anciens et modernes [The quarrel of the ancients and the moderns], with its roots in sixteenth-century Italy and ramifications into eighteenth-century Germany. It revolved around whether contemporary arts and (natural) sciences were equal, "parallel," or not, to those of antiquity.

A positive, self-centered notion of a present epoch and its art emerged in Germany in the wake of the French Revolution through the aesthetics of Friedrich Schiller and the Schlegel brothers, Friedrich and Wilhelm. Early German Romanticism was the first self-consciously modern cultural epoch. But while conscious and explicit about their modern, as opposed to ancient, character, the German Romantics did not adopt "modern" as an aesthetic self-description. Modernity as a self-conscious epochal concept appeared in the last decades of the nineteenth century, in the German-speaking world, as "die Moderne." Outside polemical "time diagnoses" the German concept of *Moderne* became a totalizing concept of cultural history, as in works on "Wiener and Berliner Moderne" (Vienna and Berlin modernity). For a long time, until the postmodernist challenge of the 1980s, modernity as an epochal designation remained a predominantly aesthetic and cultural-historical concept, and mainly in the German form of *Moderne*.

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In the mid-nineteenth century, another aesthetic take on the modern emerged. Modernity was an experience of, or an attitude to, the contemporary world. "Modernity," wrote the French poet Charles Baudelaire (1972: 403), "is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent," as opposed to "the eternal and the immovable." His younger fellow poet Arthur Rimbaud made this idea of being modern as an attitude into a normative maxim: "One has to be absolutely modern." Here starts the modern opposition to "tradition," and the ambition of "modernism," which has remained an aesthetic and architectural term, hardly imported into social theory.

MODERNIZATION

In social theory, modernity appeared occasionally as the aim or the success of modernization, but basically as an appendix to the latter. More often the destination was conceived as "modern society." Modernization is a post-World II, early postcolonial concept, referring to an international catching-up "process of social change whereby less developed societies acquire characteristics common to more developed societies" (Lerner 1968: 386). As such, modernization emerged as a polite way of talking about what in the preceding colonial epoch had been described as civilization, Europeanization, and Westernization. Occasionally, modernization was defined in a more general, consistently relativistic way as "the process whereby national elites seek successfully to reduce their *atimic* status [status loss] and move towards equivalence with other 'well-placed' nations" (Nettl and Robertson 1968: 56–57).

Sociological and political science investigations of modernization rose as accompaniments to the new subdiscipline of development economics, with major – but far from exclusive – foci on pre-communist China, the Middle East, and Latin America. The theoretical backbone of modernization theory was provided by Talcott Parsons. In its updated academic language, it had the same cultural (not racist) satisfied self-assurance as the "civilizing missions" of the now shrunk and shrinking British and French empires. "The thesis … is that the modern type of society has emerged a single evolutionary arena, the West, which is essentially the area of Europe … heir of the Roman Empire north of the Mediterranean." The beginning of the system of modern societies took place in the seventeenth century, with England as its center of crystallization. In "contemporary modernity" "the new lead society" is the United States (Parsons 1971: 1; chs. 4 and. 6)

Modernization in the perspective of Parsons involved four fundamental evolutionary processes of universal import: differentiation, adaptive upgrading (technical-economic development), inclusion, and value generalization (away from particularisms). Empirically minded modernization scholars translated these processes into a number of indicators and modern–traditional dichotomies, such as (il)literacy, urbanization, nuclear–extended families, social mobility, technology, media exposure, political participation, and so on.

The heyday of modernization theory was from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s. Then it was eclipsed by two sets of critiques. One focused on the chosen background of modernization, "traditional societies," arguing that the latter were not undeveloped societies of primordial tradition, but outcomes of processes of "development of underdevelopment" (Frank 1969: 1) by imperial domination and exploitation in an unequal world system. The other questioned the unilinear evolutionism and the monosystemic conception of the world implied in modernization: there was only one system of modern societies, the one

led by the United States. Critics pointed out that this was a capitalist system, to which there was a socialist opposition and possible social alternatives. In the late 1970s and the 1980s, modernization was overshadowed by world-system analysis, or just abandoned.

When the world turned to a more clearly monosystemic appearance, modernization staged a certain comeback, as a post-Maoist slogan in China, where the new leadership launched "Four Modernizations" (of agriculture, industry, science and technology, and defense). After the implosion of the Soviet Union and its bloc, modernization theory has had a certain renaissance in Germany and East-Central Europe, following the lead of Jürgen Habermas's characterization of the Eastern European events of 1989 as a "nachholende Revolution" [a catching-up revolution]. However, the critique of the unilinearity of the modernization process has stuck, with some exceptions in East-Central Europe and East Asia. The concept of modernity, by contrast, now cut off from any straight process of modernization, has appeared to offer more promising, illuminating perspectives.

MODERNITY AND POSTMODERNITY

Modernization was a sociological invention that did not spread to the arts. But modernity was primarily a concept of aesthetics and cultural history, used in French and German before English. While it was sometimes used to designate the aim or the success of modernization, modernity had a marginal existence in the shadow of modernization.

Parameters changed with the postmodernist challenge of the 1970s–1980s. The attack on modernism and things modern came from art, architecture, philosophy, and cultural theory. It was mainly in response to postmodernism that a social theory of modernity emerged. While not making deep and enduring inroads into the social sciences, in contrast to parts of the humanities, postmodernism signaled that the contemporary cultural world was a specific, multifaceted cultural era, the assumptions and the achievements of which were now questioned in a novel manner. Important social and intellectual forces were mounting powerful critiques of the modern world: Environmentalists were questioning economic growth and the new technology of nuclear energy, rationalist modernist design projects like large-scale, motorizing urban renewal met with widespread resistance. From French philosophy Michel Foucault had forcefully undermined uncritical interpretations of Enlightenment modernity by his historical studies of its institutionalization of surveillance and discipline, and by his and other contemporary French philosophers' questioning of rationalist and objectivist truth claims. Within sociology, Zygmunt Bauman (1989) had nailed modern civilization with its instrumental rationality and bureaucratic organization as "most certainly … [the] *necessary* condition [of the Holocaust]."

Explicitly postmodern critiques made modernity something to defend by those who disagreed. The first major intellectual response came from Jürgen Habermas (1988/1980), mainly from an aesthetic and philosophical angle. Habermas defended what he called the Enlightenment's "project of modernity," which he defined as a support of objectivating science, universalistic foundations of morals and law, and of autonomous art, disembedded from religious and metaphysical constraints, *and* at the same time as a use of the cognitive potential of these autonomous intellectual spheres for a rational shaping of human living conditions. This project, Habermas (1988/1980: 191–192) argued, was "unfinished" (*unvollendet*.)

Sociology had always been (predominantly) modernist, without saying so. Now, social theorists had to explicate why, and to what extent. Anthony Giddens's 1988 Stanford lectures, entitled *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990), was the first full response, although its direct engagement with postmodernism was brief, taking it mainly as poststructuralist epistemology, to which an institutional sociology was contrasted, leaving open the possibility of an institutional postmodernity (1990: 149–150). His epochal definition of modernity is the same as that of Parsons, referring to "modes of social life or organization which emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onwards and which subsequently became more or less worldwide in their influence" (1990: 1) Both are looking at Europe from the seventeenth century, but they see different things. Institutionally, Giddens (1990: 59, 174, 53, respectively) sees capitalism, surveillance, military power, and industrialism, summed up in the nation-state and in systematic capitalist production; and he sees a different dynamism of modernity, a separation of time and space, a development of mechanisms disembedding social activities from localized contexts, and a "reflexive appropriation of knowledge." Modernity, for Giddens (1990: 174–175), is a "Western project." However, because of modernity's intrinsic globalizing tendencies, we have now, according to Giddens (1990: 176), entered a "high modernity" "cut loose from its moorings … in the dominance of the West."

Modernity became a very popular concept in sociology and social theorizing in the 1990s, largely treated within the coordinates set by Giddens, empirically Euro-centered but no longer theoretically Eurocentric, focused on descriptive interpretations, or "understandings" of an epoch; and, in the wake of the work of Michel Foucault, explicitly presenting the era as Janus-faced, with a repressive as well as an emancipatory side, a vision already clear in Max Weber, who for all his admiration of rational capitalism saw it developing into an "iron cage." Peter Wagner's (1994) *Sociology of Modernity* summed it up as "liberty and discipline."

Opposition to the postmodernist challenge led also to attempts at updating modernity and modernization into a new stage – not postmodern, but entailing a much more self-critical and circumspect "reflexive modernization" (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994). For Giddens, this process was constituted by globalization and the "excavation of tradition"; in Ulrich Beck's version it issued into a research program (in the early 2000s) of a new era, the "second modernity," postnational and postindustrial.

The sociology of modernity has been predominantly *interpretative* rather than investigating. The concept has been used mainly as a platform for different interpretations of the most recent centuries of European (and North American) history. The interpretations have developed along three lines of defining modernity, implicitly or explicitly. Predominant in the social sciences have been institutional definitions, on par with but often adding some critical features to those of modernization theory. Second, social interpretations of modernity have also, taking up the lead of Baudelaire, gone beyond its macro-institutions and practices, focusing instead on its subjectivity, its kind of personal identities, on the experience of it. "To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are" (Berman 1982:15). A third line of interpretation has come out of conceptual historiography, sticking to a strict definition of modernity as a specific culture of time: linear and future-oriented instead of

cyclical and backward-looking and questioning the authorities of the past. This time orientation, extrapolating from the etymology of the modern, is often incorporated in the two other definitions, but in a marginal or subaltern position. From a time-culture perspective, institutional interpretations have been criticized as tautological or largely redundant.

In an *investigating* mode, the concept of modernity has been an important part of what has been called the "cultural turn" in social science and historiography. As such, it has provided an orientation and a cultural connection of studies crossing the faculty boundaries of humanities and social sciences, above all of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, while also inspiring US historical sociology of the 2000s.

However, research on modernity itself, its origins and its forms, has been sparse. Questions of origins and crucial changes of trajectory have largely been left to a few historians, such as the conceptual historian Reinhart Koselleck, who saw modernity as a new conception of time and history, emerging in the second half of the European Enlightenment, and the historian of science Stephen Toulmin, who focused on the significance of rationality in seventeenth-century philosophy, and on the concern with reasonableness in late Renaissance humanism. Latin American scholars steeped in world-system analysis, such as Enrique Dussel and Aníbal Quijano, have asserted the decisive importance of the European conquest of the Americas for the rise of modernity. A contribution from sociology (by Göran Therborn) has been the finding of when and where the old concepts of revolution and reform lost the original meaning of their prefix "re" (meaning "back"), in the course of and in the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution.

The cultural forms of modernity, in a much broader conception of culture than the aesthetic, including the formulation and the institutionalization of knowledge, have been investigated in Richard Münch's (1986) two-volume comparison of England, France, Germany, and United States, in the German tradition of cultural history of the *Moderne*, more theoretically engaged.

The epochality of the modern might also be interpreted as involving a specific kind of subjectivity. The major work, interpretative as well as investigating, on the subjectivity of modernity is Charles Taylor's (1989) *Sources of the Self*, a strongly Western-centered treatise on modern conceptions of the self and its ethics, but also with an explicit awareness of its intrinsic conflicts. Modern identity, Taylor elaborated, had three major facets: an inwardness as beings with inner depths, an affirmation of ordinary life, and an expressivist notion of nature as an inner moral source.

MULTIPLE MODERNITIES

Late twentieth-century theorizing of modernity took place in a context of globalization, of vigorous postcolonial and other third world cultural studies. After the outcome of the Vietnam War, the northern Euro-American model image, so natural to the modernization theorists of the 1950s and 1960s, was no longer tenable. Mainstream Western social science was still largely West-centered – primarily interested in European and North American societies and their history – though no longer theoretically West-centric and paying attention, at least in principle, to globalization and globality.

A major break came in the late 1990s, with the concept and research program of *multiple modernities*. It was launched and inspired by Shmuel Eisenstadt, an Israeli sociologist, trained in Parsonsian America, once a modernization theorist, but all the time a dedicated intercultural comparativist. The

program of multiple modernities attacked the modernity of modernization theory head on. "The actual developments in modernizing societies have refuted the homogenizing and hegemonic assumptions of the Western program of modernity" (Eisenstadt 2000: 1). Furthermore, "The variability of modernities was accomplished above all through military and economic imperialism and colonialism" (Eisenstadt 2000: 14), generating institutional changes and provoking "the continuous selection, reinterpretation, and reformulation" of ideas imported from superior powers.

Eisenstadt's notion of modernities in the plural was developed and demonstrated in the late 1990s, in collaboration with an array of distinguished area specialists, on China and East Asia, India and South Asia, the Islamic world, Japan, Latin America, and a few other countries. This was a conceptual breakthrough, backed up by superior intellectual force.

The de-Westernized conception of modernity has inspired, and/or opened public space for, a considerable number of non-Western studies and interpretations of, for example, alternative, at large, compressed, fractured, global, hybrid, postcolonial, and urban modernities.

Two criticisms have been mounted of the concept and the program of multiple modernities. Both, in different ways, touch upon the ideographic thrust of the program, enhanced by its reliance on area specialists. One has focused on its implied inclination to separate histories of the multiple modernities, and its little attention to their imbricated, interwoven aspects. True, Eisenstadt and Schluchter (1998: 5) had emphasized that the former "have been shaped by the continuous interaction between the cultural codes of these societies and their exposure to new internal and external challenges." But the concept of *entangled modernities*, put forward by the Indian-German anthropologist Shalini Randeria, has a more pointed potential, by highlighting not only the interaction but also the mutual influences of, for example, colonizers and colonized in shaping the modernity not only of the colonized but also of the colonizing metropole. Retrospectively, the notion of entangled modernities provides an apt conceptual framework for many instances of mutual influences across the asymmetrical power divide of colonizer and colonized, for instance in urban planning, in France and in French colonial North Africa, or in Japan and Japanese Taiwan and Manchuria.

A second criticism of the multiple modernities program has been concerned with what might be called its comparative fuzziness – although a program volume on early modernities did include a comparative focus on forms and meanings of civil society and the public sphere in different parts of the world – and its nomothetic abdication. Both are, in principle, redeemable limitations, the overcoming of which would, however, require a major extension and specification of the program.

"The idea of multiple modernities presumes that the best way to understand the contemporary world … is to see it as a story of continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs" (Eisenstadt 2000: 2). From angles of interests in focused comparisons and generalizing explanations, stopping at a multiplicity of cultural programs – even if laying out their character and tracing their historical development – may be seen as a premature closure.

In any explanatory framework it is necessary to reduce the myriad of trajectories to the contemporary multiplicity of modernities. One way suggested, originally generalized from a global study of the development of rights to vote and their meanings, has been to focus on the establishment of nation-states – a

central political institution widely considered constitutive of modern politics. While the nation has often been defined in historical terms, the nation-state has always been seen as facing an open future. In this vein, four major *pathways*, or routes, to modernity, defined as the crystallization of a modern kind of power, have been distinguished. These are the European or internal conflict within contexts of global imperial rivalry, the secessionist settler road of the Americas and Oceania, the path of colonialism and emancipation from colonialism, and the route of "reactive modernization," of which Meiji Japan is the paradigmatic example. Each pathway may be divided into subvariants, or combined, or entangled, as ideal types, in a single country case. The aim of this exercise is not taxonomic but explanatory, arguing that the pathways have enduring effects: for example, on prevailing concepts of the nation, on notions of political rights, on the social role of religion, on the importance of class as a social divide and social organization, and so forth (Therborn 2011: 54–83).

The concept of modernity is being deployed in an investigative as well as in an interpretative mode, both a legitimate function of social theory. Modernization may no longer be sustainable as a universal process of unilinear evolution. However, its political or cultural use as an aim is one appropriate indicator of modernity as a time culture. The explicit postmodernist challenge petered out in the 1990s, but to what extent in the twenty-first century humankind, or sectors of it, will continue to look at the future in a modern way – as growth, development, progress, emancipation – remains to be seen. At least in technology, science, medicine, and economics the world is still clearly living in modernity. In politics and the arts this has become less clear. Questions of modernity and postmodernity are likely to remain on scholarly agendas.

SEE ALSO: Eisenstadt, Shmuel Noah; Foucault, Michel; Historical Sociology; Liquid Modernity; Parsons, Talcott; Postmodernism; World-Systems Theory

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