

Modernity

GERARD DELANTY

The idea of modernity concerns the interpretation of the present time in light of historical reinterpretation. It refers too to the confluence of the cultural, social, and political currents in modern society. The term signals a tension within modern society between its various dynamics and suggests a process by which society constantly renews itself.

The word “modern” comes from the Latin word *modus*, meaning now, but the term “modernity” has a stronger meaning, suggesting the possibility of a new beginning based on human autonomy and the consciousness of the legitimacy of the present time (Blumenberg 1983). In Agnes Heller’s words, modernity means: “Everything is open to query and to testing; everything is subject to rational scrutiny and refuted by argument” (Heller 1999: 41).

The first use of the term modern goes back to the early Christian Church in the fifth century when it was used to distinguish the Christian era from the pagan age. Arising from this was an association of modernity with the renunciation of the recent past, which was rejected in favor of a new beginning and a reinterpretation of historical origins. However, the term did not gain widespread currency until the seventeenth-century French “Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns” on whether modern culture is superior to classical culture. The term modernity as opposed to modern did not arise until the nineteenth century. One of the most famous uses of the term was in 1864, when the French poet Baudelaire gave it the most well-known definition: “By modernity I mean the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent” (Baudelaire 1964: 13).

Baudelaire’s definition of modernity was reflected in part in modernism to indicate a particular cultural current in modern society that captured the sense of renewal and cosmopolitanism of modern life. It signaled a spirit of creativity and renewal that was most radically

expressed in the avant-garde movement. But the term had a wider social and political resonance in the spirit of revolution and social reconstruction that was a feature of the nineteenth century. Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* invoked the spirit of modernity with their description of modern society and capitalism as the condition “all that is solid melts into air.” The writings of Walter Benjamin have been a point of reference for many of the recent debates on modernity. In his work, the cultural movement of modernism was blended with a social theory of modern society. Benjamin was interested in the ways modern society is experienced, in particular the highly mediated modes of experience that are a feature of modern life. He was struck by the momentary nature of such experiences.

Within classical sociology, Georg Simmel is generally regarded as the figure who first gave a more rigorous sociological interpretation of modernity, with his account of social life in the modern city. For Simmel, as for Benjamin, modernity is expressed in diverse “momentary images” or “snapshots” (see Frisby 1986). The fragmentation of modern society, on the one side, and on the other new technologies such as the camera and the cinema led to more and more such moments and the feeling that there is nothing durable and solid.

Modernity may thus be described simply as the loss of certainty and the realization that certainty can never be established once and for all. It is a term that also can simply refer to reflection on the age and in particular to movements within modern society that lead to the emergence of new modes of thought and consciousness.

The concept of modernity was for long associated with the work of culturally oriented thinkers such as Baudelaire, Benjamin, and Simmel and was overshadowed by other terms, such as capitalism, within mainstream sociology and social theory as far as the conceptualization of modern society is concerned. Since the so-called cultural turn in the social sciences and the rise of post-disciplinary developments, new interpretations of history have led to a wider application of the idea of modernity. The turn to modernity since the late

1980s can be in part explained by a dissatisfaction with the older ideas of modernization, on the one hand, and on the other capitalism as the key features of modern society. The idea of modernity indicated a concern with issues and dimensions of modern society that were largely ignored by some of the main currents in sociology.

As both modernization theory and Marxist theory lost their influence, modernity suggested a more fruitful theoretical approach to interpret modern society. The debate about postmodernism was central to this. Habermas's attack on postmodernism and his defense of modernity as "an incomplete project" was hugely influential in reopening the debate on modernity in a way that linked it into a systematic reappraisal of sociological theory.

In Habermas's social theory, the project of modernity concerns the extension of a potentially emancipatory communicative rationality to all parts of society. The implication of this is the permanent condition of a fundamental tension at the heart of modern society between communicative rationality and instrumental rationality. For Habermas this tension gives to modernity its basic normative orientation and the defining feature that it is an open horizon of possibilities as a result of this tension. It is for this reason that modernity cannot be reduced to one particular structure, but is a societal condition formed out of the ongoing contestation of power. The modernity of modern societies is thus to be found in the ways societies find communicative solutions to problems created by instrumental rationality, such as capitalism.

Johann Arnason (1991) explains modernity as a "field of tensions." One major example of this is Castoriadis's (1987) characterization of modernity in terms of a radical imaginary confronting the institutional imaginary, which tries to domesticate it. His conception of modernity has become increasingly influential. The very condition of the possibility of society is made possible by the radical imaginary which projects an image of an alternative society. For Castoriadis, this is a constitutive feature of all societies and it is one that even the tendency toward domination and instrumental mastery does not eliminate. This approach has been developed into a more elaborated theory of modernity by Agnes Heller (1999) and has been taken up by Arnason.

These approaches give prominence to the creative dynamics and tensions in modernity which result from the pursuit of the goal of autonomy, on the one side, and on the other the pursuit of power and material accumulation. Emerging out of these dynamics are self-transformative tendencies and a self-conscious reflexivity.

Developments within postmodern thought gave additional weight to modernity as containing autonomous logics of development and unfulfilled potential. Several theorists argued that the postmodern moment should be seen to be merely modernity in a new key (Bauman 1987). What has emerged out of these developments is a new interest in "cultural modernity" as a countermovement in modern society, but also what Koselleck has called a historical semantics. So modernity is now not just seen as an "incomplete project," to use Habermas's formulation, but it is also one that is on "endless trial," to cite Kolakowski (1990). For Koselleck (1985), modernity is characterized by the constantly changing interpretation of the present by reference to its past and to the open horizon of its future.

So what is emerging out of this way of theorizing modernity is an approach that stresses the ambivalence of modernity, which cannot be reduced to a single dimension, as in the work of Weber, the Frankfurt School, or Foucault, for whom modernity is a matter of a disciplinary apparatus of power. Many theorists of modernity look instead to a double logic, which Peter Wagner (1994) has described as a relation of liberty and discipline, or in Alain Touraine's (1995) terms can be seen as a struggle of reason and the subject. This tension within modernity can also be illustrated by reference to Adam Seligman's characterization of modernity in terms of a "wager" over the nature of authority: modernity staked everything on reason and the individual as opposed to the sacred. There is some evidence to suggest this bet has not been won, given the return of ethnic and religious identities (Seligman 2003: 32–3). Whether or not this bet has been won or lost, this is one way of seeing modernity in terms of a tension that put risk at the center of its consciousness.

Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck, in different but related ways, have highlighted the reflexivity of modernity. The notion of reflexive modernization, or reflexive modernity, is aimed to capture

the ways in which much of the movement of modernity acts upon itself. Beck has introduced the notion of late modernity as a “second modernity,” while Giddens characterized modernity in terms of “disembedding” processes such as the separation of time and space. Such approaches to the question of modernity have been principally responding to the challenge of globalization. Globalization can be seen as a process that intensifies connections between many parts of the world, and as such it is one of the primary mechanisms of modernity today. This has led some theorists to refer to global modernity, for modernity today is global.

It is obvious from this outline of modernity that it does not refer to a historical era. Rather, the term refers to processual aspects, especially tensions and dynamics. Modernity is thus a particular kind of time consciousness which defines the present in its relation to the past, which must be continuously recreated; it is not a historical epoch that can be periodized. However, this issue has become more complicated as a result of new developments in the theory of modernity. Much of these developments follow from the relation of globalization to modernity. On the one side, modernity is indeed global, but on the other there is a diversity of routes to modernity. The problem thus becomes one of how to reconcile the diversity of societal forms with a conception of modernity that acknowledges the consequences of globalization.

It is in this context that the term multiple modernities can be introduced. Originally advocated by S. N. Eisenstadt (2003), this has grown out of the debate on globalization, comparative civilizational analysis, and the postcolonial concern with “alternative modernities” (Gaonkar 2001). Central to this approach is a conceptualization of modernity as plural condition. Associated with this turn in the theory of modernity is a gradual movement away from the exclusive concern with western modernity to a more cosmopolitan perspective. Modernity is not westernization and its key processes and dynamics can be found in all societies.

Rather than dispensing with modernity, post-modernism and postcolonialism have given a new

significance to the idea of modernity which now lies at the center of many debates in sociology and other related disciplines in the social and human sciences.

SEE ALSO: Benjamin, Walter; Capitalism; Civilizations; Globalization; Globalization, Culture and; Modernization; Postmodern Social Theory; Postmodernism; Secularization; Simmel, Georg; Social Change

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