

MODERNITY*

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Modernity is neither a sociological concept, nor a political concept, nor exactly a historical concept. It is a characteristic mode of civilization, which opposes itself to tradition, that is to say, to all other anterior or traditional cultures: confronting the geographic and symbolic diversity of the latter, modernity imposes itself throughout the world as a homogeneous unity, irradiating from the Occident. Nevertheless, it remains a confused notion, which connotes in a global manner any historical evolution and change of mentality.

Inextricably myth and reality, modernity specifies itself in all domains: modern State, modern technique, modern music and painting — as a sort of general category and cultural imperative. Born of certain profound upheavals of economic and social organization, it becomes concrete at the level of custom, style of life, and the quotidian — even to the point of caricaturing itself. Shifting in its forms, in its contents, in time and in space, it is stable and irreversible only as a system of values, like myth — and, in this sense, it should be written with a capital: Modernity. In that, it resembles Tradition.

As modernity is not an analytic concept, there can be no laws of modernity: there are only traits of modernity. There is no theory of it either: only a logic of modernity and an ideology. As the canonical morality of change, it opposes itself to the canonical morality of tradition, but it is nevertheless just as wary of radical change. It is the “tradition of the new” (Harold Rosenberg). Though linked to a historical and structural crisis, modernity is really only a symptom of it. It does not analyze this crisis, it

* Jean Baudrillard, “Modernité” in *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, Vol. 12 (Paris: Encyclopaedia Universalis France, 1985), pp. 424-426. Translated by David James Miller, Purdue University.

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expresses it in an ambiguous fashion, in a continual flight before it. It acts as an ideational force and principal ideology, sublimating the contradictions of history in the effects of civilization. *It makes crisis a value*, a contradictory morality. Thus, as an idea in which a whole civilization recognizes itself, modernity assumes a regulatory cultural function and thereby surreptitiously rejoins tradition.

Genesis of Modernity

The history of the adjective 'modern' is longer than that of 'modernity'. In any cultural context, the 'ancient' and the 'modern' alternate significantly. But there does not exist a universal 'modernity,' that is to say, a historical and polemic structure of change and of crisis. The latter can only be spotted in Europe from the 16th century, and only acquires its full meaning in the 19th century.

The Renaissance

School textbooks make modern times [*les Temps modernes*] follow upon the Middle Ages, from the date of the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus (1492). The invention of printing and the discoveries of Galileo inaugurate modern Renaissance humanism. On the level of the arts, and particularly of literature, the quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns develops and culminates in the 17th and 18th centuries. Profound echoes of the division of modernity are also heard in the religious domain: the Reformation (in Wittenberg, on October 31, 1517, Luther posts his 95 theses opposing the indulgences) and the rupture it inaugurates for the Protestant countries, but also the repercussions of this on the Catholic world (Council of Trent, 1545-1549, 1551-1552, 1562-1563). The Catholic Church is already undertaking an updating, making itself, with the Society of Jesus, modern, worldly and missionary; perhaps this explains why the term modernity will have a more current, more significant reception in the countries which have kept the Roman traditions, rites and customs, even while progressively renovating them. In fact, the term only takes on strength in countries with a long tradition. To speak of modernity scarcely has meaning in a country without tradition or Middle Ages, like the United States. Inversely, modernization has a very strong impact in Third World countries with strong traditional cultures.

In countries touched by the Catholic Renaissance, the conjunction of lay and secular humanism with the more worldly ritualism of traditional Catholic forms and customs lends itself better to all the complexity of social and artistic life which the development of modernity implies than does the strict alliance of rationalism and moralism in Protestant culture.

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Modernity is not just the reality of technical, scientific and political upheavals since the 16th century; it is also the play of signs, customs, and culture which translates these structural changes at the level of ritual and social habitus.

The 17th and 18th Centuries

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the philosophical and political fundamentals of modernity are set in place: individualistic and modern rationalist thought, of which Descartes and the philosophy of the Enlightenment are representative; the centralized monarchical State, with its administrative techniques succeeding the feudal system; the foundations of a physical and natural science, which lead to the first effects of an applied technology (Diderot's *Encyclopédie*). Culturally, it is the period of the total secularization of the arts and of the sciences. The quarrel of the Ancients and of the Moderns traverses this whole period, from Perraut (*Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes*, 1688) and Fontenelle (*Digression sur les Anciens et les Modernes*, 1688), who derived a law of progress of the human spirit, up to Rousseau (*Dissertation sur la musique moderne*, 1750) and Stendhal (*Racine et Shakespeare*, 1823), who conceived of 'romanticism' as a radical modernism, taking as his theme daily customs and subjects borrowed from national history. This quarrel defines an autonomous movement, free from any 'Renaissance' or imitation. Modernity is not yet a way of life (the term does not then exist). But it has become an idea (linked to that of progress). It has taken on a liberal bourgeois tonality which will continue to mark it ideologically.

The Industrial Revolution and the 20th Century

The Revolution of 1789 established the modern, centralized and democratic, bourgeois State, the nation with its constitutional system, its political and bureaucratic organization.

The continual progress of the sciences and of techniques, the rational division of industrial work, introduce into social life a dimension of permanent change, of destruction of customs and traditional culture. Simultaneously, the social division of work introduced some profound political cleavages, a dimension of social struggles and of conflicts which will echo through the 19th and 20th Century.

These two major aspects, which will add to demographic development, urban concentration, and the gigantic development of the means of communication and information, will mark modernity, in decisive fashion, as a social practice and way of life articulated on change and innovation — but also on anxiety, instability, continual mobilization, shifting subjectivity,

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tension, crisis — and as an ideal representation or mythology. In this context, the date of the appearance of the word itself (Theophile Gautier, Baudelaire, 1850 or so) is significant: it is the moment when modern society realizes itself as such, thinks itself in terms of modernity. The latter becomes a transcendent value, a cultural model, a morality — a myth of reference present everywhere, and concealing in part the historical structures and contradictions which gave birth to it.

The Logic of Modernity

Techno-scientific Concept

The prodigious expansion, particularly for the last 100 years, of science and technique, the rational and systematic development of the means of production, their management and organization, marks modernity as the era of productivity: an intensification of human labour and of human domination over nature, both reduced to the status of productive forces and to the schemas of efficacy and maximal output. This is the common denominator of all modern nations. If this 'revolution' of productive forces has not changed life, because it leaves the relations of production and social relations relatively unchanged, at least it modifies the conditions of life from one generation to the other. It institutes today a profound mutation in modernity: the passage from a civilization of work and progress to a civilization of consumption and leisure. But the mutation is not radical: it does not change the productivist finality, the chronometric cutting up of time, the forward-looking and operational imperatives which remain the fundamental coordinates of the modern ethic of the productive society.

Political Concept

"The abstraction of the political State as such belongs only to modern times [*Temps modernes*], because the abstraction of private life belongs only to modern times [*Temps modernes*] . . . In the Middle Ages, the life of the people and the life of the State are identical: man is the real principle of the State . . . modern times [*Temps modernes*] are the abstract dualism, the abstract reflected opposition" (Marx, *Critique de la philosophie de l'État de Hegel*).

It is in fact the abstract transcendence of the State, under the sign of the Constitution, and the formal status of the individual, under the sign of private property, which defines the political structure of modernity. The (bureaucratic) rationality of the State and that of private interest and of private consciousness converge in the same abstraction. This duality marks the end of all anterior systems, where political life was defined as an

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integrated hierarchy of personal relations. The hegemony of the bureaucratic State has only grown with the progress of modernity. Linked to the extension of the field of political economy and other organizational systems, it invests all sectors of life, mobilizing them to its own advantage, rationalizing them in its image. What sometimes obstinately resists these tendencies (affective life, traditional languages and cultures), may now be deemed residual. However, one of the essential dimensions (if not *the* essential dimension) of modernity, the abstract centralized State, is perhaps also in the process of faltering. The hegemonic constraint of the State, the bureaucratic saturation of social and individual life, are no doubt preparing great crises in this domain.

Psychological Concept

In contrast to the magic, religious, symbolic consensus of traditional (communal) society, the modern era is marked by the emergence of the individual, with his status of autonomous consciousness, his psychology and personal conflicts, his private interest — indeed, his unconsciousness; the individual is drawn increasingly into the network of media, organizations, and institutions, which give rise to his modern alienation, abstraction, loss of identity in work and leisure, incommunicability, etc., which a whole system of personalization through objects and signs is intended to compensate.

Modernity and Time

In all its dimensions, modern temporality is specific.

The *chronometric* dimension: this is time which is measured, and by which one measures one's activities; as that which highlights the division of labor and social life, this abstract time belongs to the imperative of productivity, and is substituted for the rhythms of work and celebration. Bureaucratic temporality regulates even "free" time and leisure.

The *linear* dimension: "modern" time is no longer cyclical, it develops according to a past-present-future line, according to a supposed origin and end. Tradition seems centered on the past, modernity on the future, but, in fact, only modernity projects a past (time gone by), at the same time that it projects a future, according to a dialectic which is proper to it.

The *historic* dimension: especially since Hegel, history has become the dominant instance of modernity. At the same time as the real becoming of society and as transcendent reference allowing a glimpse of its final accomplishment.

As measurable, irreversible, chronometric succession or dialectical becoming, modernity has secreted an entirely new temporality. This is a

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crucial feature of modernity — an image of its contradictions. But at the interior of this time, which is indefinite, and no longer knows any eternity, one thing distinguishes modernity: it always wants to be 'contemporary,' i.e., it seeks global simultaneity. After first privileging the dimension of progress and the future, it seems to confound itself more and more today with the present, the immediate, the everyday — the reverse, pure and simple, of historical duration [*durée*].

The Rhetoric of Modernity

Innovation and Avant-Garde

In the sphere of culture and custom, modernity is translated, in formal opposition, but also in fundamental relation to bureaucratic and political centralization, the homogenization of forms of social life, through an exaltation of depth subjectivity, passion, singularity, authenticity, the ephemeral and the ineffable — in short, through breach of rules and irruption of personality, conscious or not.

Baudelaire's "painter of modern life," the bridge between romanticism and contemporary modernity, marks the departure of this quest for the new, this drifting of the subjective: "There he goes: he runs, he seeks. What is he looking for? Surely this man, such as I have depicted him, this recluse with an active imagination, travelling across the great desert of men . . . seeks that something we can call modernity."

At all levels, modernity gives rise to an aesthetic of rupture, of individual creativity, of innovation marked by the sociological phenomena of the avant-garde (whether in the domain of culture or in that of fashion) and by the always more extensive destruction of traditional forms (genres in literature, rules of harmony in music, laws of perspective and of representation in painting, academicism and, more generally, the authority and legitimacy of the received models of fashion, sexuality, and social conduct).

Mass Media, Fashion and Mass Culture

This fundamental tendency has been especially active since the 20th century, through the industrial diffusion of cultural means, the extension of mass culture, and the gigantic intervention of the media (press, cinema, radio, television, advertising). The ephemeral character of form and content has been accentuated, one loses count of the revolutions of style, fashion, writing, custom. In radicalizing itself thus in a change of perspective, in a continual dolly-shot, modernity changes meaning. Bit by bit, it loses all the substantial value of progress which underlay it at the beginning, in order to

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become an aesthetic of change for change's sake. It abstracts itself and deploys itself in a new rhetoric, it inscribes itself in the play of one or multiple systems of signs. At the limit, it merges purely and simply with fashion, which is at the same time the end/aim [*la fin*] of modernity.

The reason for this is that modernity enters into a cyclical process of change, where all the forms of the past (archaic, folkloric, rustic, traditional) are dredged up, drained of their substance, but idealized as signs in a code where tradition and *neo*, ancient and modern, become equivalent and function as alternates. Modernity no longer has the value of rupture at all: it nourishes itself on the vestiges of all cultures in the same way that it does from its technical gadgets or from the ambiguity of all values.

Tradition and Modernity in Third World Societies

Destruction and Change

The distinctive traits, the ferments, the problematic and the contradictions of modernity reveal themselves with the most force where its historical and political impact is the most brutal: in colonized tribal or traditional societies. Apter sees in colonialism a "modernizing force," a "model by which modernization has been universalized."¹

Older systems of exchange are dismantled by the rise of money and the spread of the market economy. Traditional systems of power are swept aside under the pressure of colonial administrations or the new indigenous bureaucracies.

However, in the absence of a political and industrial revolution in depth, it is often the most technical, the most exportable features of modernity which touch the developing societies: the objects of industrial production and consumption, the *mass media*. It is in its technical materiality, and as spectacle, that modernity first invests these societies, and not through the long process of economic and political rationalization peculiar to the West. However, the fallout of modernity has its own characteristic political repercussion: it accelerates the destruction of the indigenous way of life and precipitates social demands for change.

Resistance and Amalgamation

If, therefore, modernity appears here also as rupture, the more precise analysis begun since the Second World War by political anthropology (Balandier, Leach, Apter, Althabe) shows that things are more complex.² The traditional system (tribal, clan, lineal [*lignager*]) offers the strongest resistance to change, and the modern structures (administrative, moral,

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religious) intertwine with these forces through the most curious compromises. Modernity always emerges in this context through a resurgence of tradition, though the latter will have lost its conservative meaning. Favret even describes how the peasants of the *Aurès* reactivated traditional political mechanisms as a demand for progress, in order to protest the lagging spread, in their region, of the instruments and signs of modernity.³

This is important: the terrain of anthropology shows, more clearly than European history, the truth of modernity, namely, that it is never radical change or revolution, but always arises in implication with tradition in a subtle cultural play, in a debate where the two are hand in glove, in a process of amalgamation and adaptation. Thus, analyses based on a *dialectic of rupture* must give way to an approach which recognizes the *dynamic of amalgamation*.

Ideologies as Signs of Modernity

The analysis of decolonized societies uncovers another specific expression of modernity: ideology. Ideologies (national, cultural, political) are contemporaries of detribalization and of modernization. Imported from the West and impregnated with rituals and with traditional beliefs, they nevertheless constitute, more than the economic infrastructure, the locus of change and conflict, of the upheaval of values and of attitudes. Here it is even more a matter of the rhetoric of modernity, deployed in all its ambiguity in societies where it compensates for real backwardness and non-development.

Such observations help define the paradox of modernity. Destruction and change, but also ambiguity, compromise, amalgamation: modernity is paradoxical, rather than dialectical. If ideology is a typically 'modern' concept, if ideologies are the expression of modernity, no doubt *modernity is itself only a vast ideological process*.

Ideology and Modernity

Conservatism through Change

Thus the dynamic of modernity reveals itself, in the West as well as the Third World, as both the locus of emergence of factors of rupture and as a compromise solution with respect to factors of order and tradition. The mobility that it implies at all levels (social, professional, geographic; marriage, fashion, sexual liberation) only defines *the portion of change tolerable by the system*, without essentially changing it. Balandier says of the countries of Black Africa: "political confrontations express themselves in a large measure, but not exclusively, through the debate on the traditional and the

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modern: the latter appears especially as their means and not as their principle cause."⁴ Similarly, one can say that in developed countries, modernity is not a force that retraces social structure or history: it is rather (in its play with tradition), the place where the social rises to the surface in order to be masked, the place where the dialectic of social meaning is blurred in the rhetorical and mythical code of modernity.

A Spectacular Ambiguity

Changes of political, economic, technological, and psychological structures are the objective historical factors of modernity. They do not constitute modernity in themselves. The latter would be defined rather as the denial of these structural changes, at least as their reinterpretation in terms of cultural style, mentality, way of life, everydayness.

Modernity is not technologic and scientific revolution, it is the play and the implication of the latter in the spectacle of private and social life, in the everyday dimension of the media, of gadgets, of domestic well-being or the conquest of space. Neither science nor technology are themselves "modern," but the *effects* of science and technology are. Though founded on the *historic* emergence of science, modernity lives only at the level of the *myth* of science.

Modernity is neither the rationality nor the autonomy of individual consciousness, which however found it. It is, after the phase of the triumphant ascension of liberties and individual rights, the *reactionary* exaltation of a subjectivity threatened everywhere by the homogenization of social life. It is the recycling of this subjectivity lost in a system of "personalization," in the effects of fashion and controlled aspiration.

Modernity is not a dialectic of history: it is the eventness, the permanent play of the present moment, the universality of news blurbs through the media.

Modernity is not the transmutation of all values, it is the destruction of all former values without surpassing them, it is the ambiguity of all values under the sign of a generalized combinatory. There is no longer either good or evil, but we are not for all that "beyond good and evil" (cf. Nietzsche's critique of modernity).

Modernity is not revolution, even if it hinges on revolutions (industrial, political, computer revolution, revolution of well-being, etc.). It is, as Lefebvre says, "the shadow of the failed revolution, its parody Situated in the interior of the inverted world and not put back on its feet, modernity accomplishes the tasks of the revolution: the surpassing of art, of morality, of ideologies" One could add: mobility, abundance, liberations of all sorts. But it accomplishes them by means of a permanent revolution of *forms*, in the *play* of change, finally in a cycle where the open breach in the world of tradition closes up.

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A Culture of the Everyday

Tradition was nourished by continuity and real transcendence. Modernity, having inaugurated rupture and discontinuity, is now closed into a new cycle. It has lost the ideological drive of reason and progress, and confounds itself more and more with the formal play of change. Even its myths turn against it (technology, once triumphant, is today full of menace). Its ideals and human values have escaped it. Modernity is characterized more and more by the *abstract transcendence of all powers*. Liberty is formal, people become masses, culture becomes fashion. Once a dynamic of progress, modernity is slowly becoming an activism of well-being. Its myth covers over the growing abstraction of social and political life, under which it boils down bit by bit into a culture of *daily events*.

Notes

1. D. Apter, *The Politics of Modernization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).
2. See George Balandier, *Political Anthropology*, trans. A.M. Sheridan-Smith (New York: Random House, 1970); Edmund Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1954); D. Apter, op. cit.
3. J. Favret, "Le Traditionalisme par excès de modernité," *Archives européennes de Sociologie*, 8 (1967).
4. Balandier, ch. 7.
5. Henri Lefebvre, *Introduction à la modernité* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit).