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MODERNITY

The terms *modern* and *modernity* have widely been used in the expression of two contrasting perspectives. They either (1) suggest that certain new habits, practices or world-views were inferior to those of ancient, medieval or classical times and origins; or (2) they claim the superiority of habits, practices, or world-views, ascribing a positive meaning to their being new, up to date, fashionable, progressive, evolutionarily successful.

It is typical of the latter perspective that the emphasis has been on "current" developments and on "the present" and that contrasts such as primitive, old, antiquated, obsolete, as well as terms with the prefix *pre* (pre-modern, pre-industrial) have been used. This perspective is applied to the most recent social, literary and aesthetic developments, and it leads to an ideology of permanent qualitative progress.

A major shift between these two views of modernity is marked by the controversy called *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* (Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns; a title derived from some writings of Charles Perault), which began in England and France in 1787 and lasted for about a century. In this long debate several philosophers of the Enlightenment questioned the superiority of antiquity, its arts and values. They thus paved the way for the self-privileging of modernity over the other epochs of human history.

The term *modernity* also designates an epoch in human history that is characterized by the emergence of nation states that build on the political loyalty of their citizens, develop standardizations of the law, and establish legal institutions and bureaucratic forms of administration. Such nation states permit and even encourage public deliberation about the common social order, the common good and the common goals. This development is connected to a consolidation of knowledge through institutionalized education and with strategies to acquire knowledge systematically by cultivating the "sciences". The political, educational, and scientific processes develop along with an industrial society that by the technological application of scientific knowledge generates a constant transformation of its natural and cultural environments.

Modernity as historical epoch

Since these developments have not occurred simultaneously across the globe, the localization of modernity in space and time is not easy and remains contestable. The Reformation is often designated, even in secular circles, as the breeding ground of typically modern mentalities. Modernity is also usually associated with the age of "enlightened thinking" that shaped Europe and North America from the second half of the eighteenth century on. During this period, the French revolution and the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) became the most important political and intellectual sources. During the last decades of the twentieth century, an ongoing international debate about the end of modernity set in, with Friedrich Nietzsche acting as an early prophet of "postmodernism." The postmodern period is fuelled by the growing conviction that the unity of reason and the rationality continuum was illusion, and by uncertainties about the future of the nation states in the process of globalization.

The ambivalences of modernity

Whereas modernity can be regarded as an endeavor to escape religious and political tyranny and authoritarian traditionalism, it has itself become a metaphor for a deeply ambivalent global enterprise. The striving for liberation, the establishment of a public legal system, mandatory education for all people, and the development of welfare systems within the nation state were just one side of the modern enterprise. The same modernity that fled the tyrannies of the past and strove for the unity of the state, the rule of law in political life, and political sovereignty based on the will of the people (democratization) also brought forth aggressive nation states characterized by chauvinism, imperialism, colonialism and ecological brutality. Similarly, the escape from prescientific and even mythical world views, the striving for a consolidation of knowledge through the sciences, the search for scientific truth, and the appeal to rationality and reason led to more than the triumph of public education and the flourishing of discovery and technological innovation. It also led to scientific and naturalistic ideologies and to blindness to religious truths and cultural complexity.

Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) offered a subtle analysis of how the unfolding and the triumph of scientific thinking shaped the modern common sense, its modes of experience and expectation, and how it correlated with a relative deformation of aesthetic, ethical and religious experience. According to Whitehead, "The modern world has lost God and is

seeking him" 1960, p. 72). The process of modernization led to a dominance of science-assisted technical reason (industrialization) and to the triumph of the powers of the market, the media, and technology—factors that have turned out to be culturally imperialistic and ecologically destructive.

Ambivalence over against the blessings or curses of modernity is rooted in a structural conflict within modernity itself, which has led to the deeply negative connotation associated with the term *modernity*. The conflict is usually spelled out by the dual of "modernity" and "post-modernity." It is also present in the ongoing discussion of whether "post-modernity" is merely an extension of modernity, a self-jeopardizing of the modern enterprise that would be better identified as *late-modernity*.

On the one hand, modernity strives for the freedom of the person, the equality of all human beings and for the universality of reason. Modernity's fight for justice and equality, and against tyranny, is connected with a passion for universal transparency and unity. For the modern mind, unity means consensus, mutual understanding and harmony based on equality. On the other hand, modern societies and cultures have developed a multisystemic texture as modernity brought forth a differentiation of social institutions, sciences and rationalities--differentiations that resist the plea for an overarching universal unity. Modernity thus created an ongoing conflict between unity and differentiation: a passion for unified reason, a universal rationality-continuum and universal morality on the one hand, and a passion for the differentiation of social systems, differentiation of the sciences, and a nonhierarchical differentiation of cultural spheres on the other side.

Several social systems work for the sustenance and the well-being of the whole society. Such systems are, for example, politics, law, religion, education, the sciences, the market, the media, technology, the arts, and the family. In this multisystemic order each system performs a function that is essential and indispensable for the whole society. At the same time each system strives for autonomy and defends itself against interferences from other systems. Each system optimizes its procedures, its rationalities and its institutional forms. Along with the differentiation of the social systems, modernity developed a rich texture of associations such as political parties, ideological movements and a variety of clubs and lobbies, all of which attempt to influence, strengthen or question and reshape the "division of powers"

within social systems. The universal and even grandiose claims of such associations grow out of the interests and goals of their members. Some are normatively and institutionally very stable, others are open to trends. These associations, which want to influence and actually do influence the social systems, make up civil-society. The complex, but by no means chaotic, interaction between social systems and civil associations constitutes so-called pluralistic societies, which provides a structured and pluralistic setting for the sciences and other cultural formations, a setting that promises to cope with the inner conflict of modernity.

Modernity and postmodernity

The structured pluralism of modern societies and cultures has brought a differentiation of rationalities: for example, those of the market, of the natural sciences, of historical investigation, of religion, of common sense. This differentiation has challenged the modern ideal of the universal unity of knowledge and of universal mutual moral communication and understanding. Yet with its multi-systemic setting it has also challenged the idea of an endless and relativistic differentiation and dissociation, an idea often connected with postmodernity. These multisystemic settings appear in many areas of life, although the question of how many social systems there are and how they should be differentiated remains open to debate. But certainly their number is finite and small, and that the evolution of a new system takes a long, as evidenced, for example, by the development of the media during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The same holds true for differentiation in the sciences or for the family of confessions in Christianity, which constitute the pluralism of the academy and the pluralism of the ecumene. Our world is much more complex than the typically modern mind is willing to admit, but it is much less chaotic than those who hope to exorcise the spirits of postmodernity would have it.

The one clear difference that divides modernity and post-modernity is reflected in many areas and on many different levels: This is the difference between the highest value and the interpretation of this value in both epochs. For modernity, the value of unity is paramount. For postmodernity, the value of difference is crucial. This, of course, includes different understandings and interpretations of *unity* and of *difference* on both sides. For the typical modern mind, difference meant conflict, disagreement, inequality or even oppression. For the postmodern mind, however, difference means freedom and creative engagement, while unity raises suspicions of adaptation and integration, control and even oppression. The postmodern

mind would nevertheless acknowledge that not all forms of difference are creative and helpful. One must differentiate between the differences and recognized that some can be destructive. The postmodern mind would also welcome differentiated forms of unity. But all forms of unity have to allow for difference, have to appreciate and even treasure difference. Otherwise they breed oppressive ideologies.

The postmodern mindset is not simply based on some Nietzschean philosophical idea. Numerous cultural and scientific achievements, along with many experiences of oppression and pain, have led to the conviction and to the affirmation that the world is *poly-contextual*. Society must welcome multiperspectival approaches and should embrace and cultivate pluralistic settings if it wants to maintain its striving for truth, justice and dignity. Different cultures, different traditions, different rationalities have to be taken seriously. Moreover, the human individual has to be taken much more seriously than modernity thought.

Modernity praised the value of theoretical "the human subject" and its autonomy, freedom, and rational self-control, but it failed to address the actual unique individual. Rather, modernity had in mind the idealized, standardized person of the bourgeois value-system: the autonomous "subject," guided by reason and universal morals. But concrete human beings are much more subtle and complex. They are determined by unique personal histories, by complex biological endowments, by intricate passions and feelings, and by different forms of rationality. Some are more impressed by religion than others; some are devoted to the natural sciences, while others are skeptical of them. Some find their key-values in family and friendship; others look for a more general orientation for the common good. The young Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) recognized the problems of the modern concept of the human person, and he accused Kant of having standardized modern subjectivity and of having attributed too much power to reason. Schleiermacher called for a new conception of individualism, one that takes each multifarious human person seriously—a sort of poly-individualism. In this respect, however, modernity itself provides possibilities for escape and for correcting its own reductionistic anthropological concepts. "All in all, resistance to rationalization has been as prominent a mark of modernity as has rationalization itself." (Bauman, p. 596)

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