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Labeling modernity

The terms *modernity* and *liberalism* are taking on an increasingly symbolic meaning in diagnosing the present state of advanced societies. We do not usually begin with definitions and clarification. Rather, debates on ideas tend to be spontaneous in nature. While it is true that spontaneity is part of life, so too are misunderstandings. The latter will become all too apparent in this diagnosis of modernity in contemporary society.

The statement that *modernity* frees mankind commands general agreement. We may be unsure what it means but we all nod in sage agreement—especially if we find ourselves in “progressive” circles (curiously, everyone is automatically assumed to be “progressive” unless they say otherwise). We therefore do not know what modernity is, the period it describes, or how it may be determined—we simply believe that everything was worse in the past. In addition, we do not know why things were worse or in what respects mankind is better off now. The notion of *the people* as opposed to *the aristocracy* might serve here if we want to stress the idea of a democratic society. Alternatively, we might choose to stress the idea of mankind’s liberation from the shackles of religious belief and its achievement of secular freedoms. Whatever choice we make, philosophy’s first duty is to define terms. Rhetoric involves creating a framework for communication which serves to construct *the people* as actor and involves basic procedures for relating terms to one another. The first thing that needs to be done is to relate what meanings have been given to each function—hence the need to define *modernity*.

Unravelling the mystery of *modernity* might start with examining the philosophical rupture of the 16th and 17th centuries. The choice of this point in time and the term *rupture* is in keeping with what English-speaking scholars term *early modernity* and they link it to Machiavelli, Galileo, Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, and Locke. The key question is, what ideas were disseminated? The question makes sense because rhetoric places great emphasis on marking the beginning of the argument. Hence the stress on precision and enumeration. But what of issues like the rule of law, freedom of conscience, a new world model, science without metaphysics, technological mastery, possessive egotism,

the dignity of citizens? Here, we need to analyse what this philosophical heritage means in terms of the problems faced by contemporary advanced societies. However, dealing with contemporary issues means entering a tangled web of passions, sympathies and antipathies whether of a general or a specific nature and which fall within the field of specialised philosophical studies.

We shall now discuss what the current situation is regarding this intellectual heritage. In doing so, we shall reveal both ambiguities and misunderstandings, some of which arise from unsatisfactory ways of debating the issues, others from the murky meanings attributed to the heritage of early modernity. Here, **it is worth differentiating between the ambiguity that may arise from evaluations, and from determinations.** We are interested in ambiguities arising from determinations because they are more difficult to grasp. If modernity embodies x, y, z , it is natural that it be valued with regard to attitudes to x, y, z . It is always worth: (1) discussing whether x, y, z are correct, incorrect, beneficial or prejudicial from the standpoint of the proposed evaluation scale, and (2) whether modernity is really x, y, z when it could be a, b, c . The distinction between ambiguities in evaluation and determination given the confusion between modernity, post-modernity, and hyper-modernity threatens to become chronic, and fill most current essays with subtle, slippery distinctions and contradictions.

Let us give an example of the need for making distinctions in the case of post-modernity. Lyotard (1979) argued that post-modernity is “l’incrédulité à l’égard des métarécits” incredulity regarding meta-narratives. The discussion on post-modernity is doomed to ambiguities with regard to evaluation if we merely focus on the polarity between *incrédulité/credulité* without indicating what they and the great narratives are in each case. The question that has to be answered is: what modernity do we mean when we postulate a post-modernity? *La condition postmoderne* is a report on university studies; according to Lyotard, the scientific nature of knowledge arises from a philosophy which legitimises it within a discourse he terms *métarécit* meta-narrative. In reality, Lyotard’s text only refers to two meta-narratives: the speculative one and the emancipatory one. The first places philosophy in relation to other bodies of knowledge, such as that which gave rise to the foundation of Berlin University by the Prussian Government (1807-1810), which Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) based on a scheme by Fichte (1807), the university’s first rector, and another scheme by Schleiermacher (1808). Schelling and Hegel also contributed to the debate. An example of the emancipatory narrative is the school policy drawn up by the French Republic under Article 9 of the Constitution of 1848 and the positions expressed in *Manuel républicain de l’homme et du citoyen* (1848), written by Charles Renouvier and commissioned by Hyppolite Carnot, Minister of Education and Religion and the older brother of the physicist who created the theory of thermodynamics. The republication of Renouvier’s work in 2000 and studies by Laurent Fedi (1999) and Marie-Claude Blais (2000) have re-awoken interest in the man and his oeuvre.

This example of “ambiguity of determination” is intended to show how a proposal is received differently depending whether or not one provides a reference point. One of the most ingenuous and insufferable aspects of post-modernity is the way people are made to think that they have invented *incrédulité*, ignoring that scepticism abounds in the history of philosophy. An approach that limits modernity to the 19th century and the justification for public education, whether it be in France or Prussia, and a handful of other examples

is what makes Lyotard's scheme possible. However, it is highly questionable to say that the whole discourse of modern philosophy is based on an alien narrative. If we note how Lyotard narrates the obsolescence of this dual model, we might be surprised at his silence on the period between 1848 and 1948. Are we really to believe that there were no tensions in French and German societies for a whole century and that the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71), popular thirst for culture, the first and second world wars, and the international labour movement counted for nothing? This unnatural silence on the upheavals in Europe between 1848 and 1948 has a bearing on the resulting analysis, from which many contemporary essays draw their inspiration. This is another case of false innocence —rather like Heidegger's relationship with "Americanism". In any case, in Lyotard's analysis, technique falls between the two stools of modernity based on speculations and one based on emancipation.

Post-modernity is the response to the idea of obsolescent modernity, and hyper-modernity is the reaction to post-modernity. Modernity, post-modernity, and hyper-modernity succeed each other in most of the current literature dealing with ideas, proposals and diagnoses. There has been talk of a **new modernity** (Alain Touraine), **radicalised modernity** (Anthony Giddens), a **second modernity** (Ulrich Beck), **reflective modernity** (Scot Lash), **neo-modernity** (architecture, Christopher Alexandre), **ultra-modernity** (J.A. Marina), **hyper-modernity** (Gilles Lipovetsky), **tardo-modernity** (Rodríguez Magda), **super-modernity**, **excessive modernity**, **post-modernity** and maybe a few others besides. Of course, there is also **anti-modernity**, which is another kettle of fish altogether but is a hidden source of many post-modern hang-ups.

Alain Touraine is a French socialist sociologist who speaks of a **new modernity** and he must bear the responsibility of shifting the focus of sociological research from a study of the social order to the *genealogy of modernity*. In an article written in 1981, he argued that the issue facing industrial societies was not how the social order worked but rather *how we had invented modernity*, how Western Europe became the cradle of progress, the industrial revolution, and had led Man's conquest of Nature. Touraine has written many books but the ones that interest us here were published between 1997 and 2001, beginning with *Critique de la modernité* (1997) and ending with *Comment sortir du libéralisme* (2001). The semantics surrounding these diagnoses are peppered with terms covering the loss of various qualities: **demodernisation**, **de-institutionalisation**, **desocialisation**, **depoliticisation**.

- Demodernisation is the individual's will to assume the quest for individual identity.
- De-institutionalisation is the waning of the importance of institutions and the waxing of individual autonomy.
- Desocialisation is characterised by the fact that society —which used to be regulated by its institutions and the roles they played— is increasingly run by market forces and other players.
- Depoliticisation is a consequence of the foregoing phenomena. Society becomes depoliticised given that the State no longer plays the institutional role it once did.

What quality is lost in these processes? Is there an analysis that breaks them down into their component parts? "La société (nationale) perd sa belle unité structurelle", he tells us.

However, it is worth asking what this synthesis consists of, how applicable it was, and the real extent of this *beauty* and *stability*. It is also worth examining the much-vaunted attributes of *La République Française* and their real impact on French life —a much more complex matter than might appear. To what extent does the *République* express an *ideal* unity of citizens? *La République Française* is an odd problem that distorts the universality of analyses covering European societies as a whole. It is worth identifying *exactly what* the sociologists are measuring and identifying given their pathological tendency to over-abstractation and pigeonholing. One needs to identify real people and the duration of the processes so labelled. Once the *République Française* has been identified, one needs to establish *chronologies* for the upheavals that racked the country between 1848 and 1948, and on which Lyotard is silent. This is important because both Lyotard's diagnosis and Touraine's sociological analysis of modernity rest on the end of social strife (and with it, the end of modernity) and the beginning of the consumer age characterised —we are told— by consumerism and boredom. Touraine's ideas, along with the rest of recent French Socialism, is just another form of Jacobinism. The new modernity is simply the transformation of Jacobinism into the cultural management of boredom. The diagnostics of Marc Fumaroli on the Cultural State seem to indicate this.

Anthony Giddens is a theorist on the renewal of the British Labour Party and an ideological proponent of the so-called “Third Way” between Capitalism and Socialism. He is “Blair's sociologist” and speaks of **radicalised modernity**. He is currently Director of *The London School of Economics and Political Science*. His book *Sociology* is an important reference book in the field. We can get a quick overview of Giddens and his work by consulting the FAQs (frequently asked questions) he answers on his web site: globalisation; the third way; the risk society; modernity; reflection and reflective modernisation; structural and sociological theory. One of his most important books is *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990). The argument of this book, in which Giddens sets forth a first approximation to the notion of “modernity”, begins with a reference to the social lifestyles that emerged in Europe *from around the 17th century onwards* and which have become more or less worldwide. Modernity is thus linked to a period of time and an initial geographical location but he then goes on to state that he will leave the most important characteristics of modernity “in a black box” for the time being.

The black box metaphor reveals the nature of Giddens' discourse, which is never between equal citizens but rather of an expert talking down to laymen who lack the magic key to make sense of the world around them. Some laymen may have observed the accident, as it were, but only Giddens and his ilk can determine its causes by examining the contents of the “black box” (or, extending the metaphor, the flight recorder). Giddens is a sociologist and thus for him everything begins with the trinity of Marx-Durkheim-Weber as the founders of sociology. He repeatedly limits himself to what “sociology literature” has to say about love, friendship, time, the calendar, money, science, and so forth —as is sociologists' wont. Giddens constantly throws this in with an insistent claim that sociology is uniquely placed to deal with modernity in whatever form it may take. This insistence, found in bald statements such as: “modernity is deeply and intrinsically

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sociological in nature” and “the impact of social sciences and sociological concepts and findings are part and parcel of modernity” are perplexing to say the least. The preceding declarations and others like them reveal his jealousy of the natural sciences —evidenced by his harping on the same theme: “the social sciences are more deeply involved in modernity than are the natural sciences because they are rooted in a review of social practices and based upon knowledge regarding those practices and hence form part of the fabric of modern institutions”. Is the impact of sociological theories really so great? Where does this impact lie? Once again, we are left in the dark. Moreover, it is surprising after endless Marxist debate on infrastructure and superstructure that some people still believe that sociological explanations exercise so much influence on the real world.

Giddens’ 1990 thesis was put forward as a way of correcting a poor characterisation of the supposed transition to post-modernity. His concept of a **radicalised modernity** was

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an attempt to determine what actually happened in this transition. “Instead of entering a post-modernist age”, writes Giddens, “we are moving into a period in which the consequences of modernity are becoming more radical and universal than ever”. Once again, questions abound: What exactly is a period here? When do we enter a new period? Who moves into the new period? How do we determine whether the transition to a

given period is still in progress or has been completed, or whether the transition is of a post-modernist nature or is an instance of radicalised modernity? An essential feature of modernity for Giddens is that basic trust is no longer vested in family and neighbours. We can say that trust based on relations and neighbours represents situation x, and when this is no longer the case, we have situation y. The problem is, what does this have to do with the periods? Giddens’ book rests on two great contrasts: “reliability and risk settings” in pre-modern and modern cultures; and the “concepts” found in post-modernity and radicalised modernity. The concept of de-linkage is of key importance in Giddens’ analysis. Zygmunt Bauman ironically notes that the rich are de-linked while the poor are de-localised (*Modernity and Ambivalence*, 1991). The contrast between post-modernity and radicalised modernity proves problematic. Giddens argues that post-modernity is where the individual’s identity is dissolved or broken up by the fragmentary nature of experience, whereas in the case of radicalised modernity, that identity is seen as more than merely the result of the confluence of forces because *modernity makes active processes of reflection and self-identification possible*.

What is never made clear is whether post-modernity is simply a diagnostic evil (i.e. not based on real events) or whether its shortcomings were corrected in a subsequent stage. This is often the impression one gets when one hears a succession of sociological explanations. One is never sure whether one is being told about different diagnoses or about different maladies. It makes one recall Julio Caro Baroja’s *Las brujas y su mundo* The World of Witches in which the prudent inquisitor states, “There were no witches until people began to talk about them”. Similarly, there is no post-modernity and radical modernity until everyone begins chattering about them.

Ulrich Beck is a brilliant German scholar who is currently full professor of Sociology at Munich's Universität Ludwig-Maximilian, where he directs a research centre on modernisation. He is also a lecturer at the London School of Economics. Modesty is not one of his failings when it comes to him describing his work in Sociology. In a discussion with Johannes Willms, he stated that the consequences of his *Cosmopolitan Sociology* are as revolutionary as Einstein's theory of relativity for Newtonian physics. As we saw with Giddens' black box, such metaphor speaks volumes about the fantasies that the diagnosers of modernity and its derivatives have about the role they play.

Beck thinks that he is sociology's answer to Einstein. He coins phrases like "Risk Society", "Cosmopolitanism", and "The Second Enlightenment" as he announces the death of "Newtonian" sociology, the Nation State, and the first modernity. Beck also plays at being the new Marx. In 1998, he published his *Cosmopolitan Manifesto* in *The New Statesman*. Its theoretical basis is that five interrelated processes have swept away the reference points characterising the first modernity: communal standards, progress, full employment, and exploitation of Nature. Beck argues the five processes characterising the second modernity are: globalisation, individualisation, revolution of the sexes, junk employment, and global risks such as an environmental crisis or a crash in world financial markets. His manifesto ends with an emotional war cry with Marxist overtones: "Citizens of the World Unite".

So, Ulrich Beck wants to be both Sociology's Einstein and a new Marx leading social movements. Everyone is entitled to their pet projects to improve an imperfect world. Dissatisfaction with the state of things justifies the need to come up with ideas to make the world a better place. However, what makes this project *viable*? In the conversation with Johannes Willms, Beck said that he felt it was very important to recognise that the second modernity "is an arena in which we can deploy ideas in an intellectually sensitive fashion". In Europe, there is a cosmopolitan project: "the conservative, hide-bound project of a Europe locked into nation states in which each country defends its sovereignty tooth and claw, or a Christian Europe that excludes other religions should be contrasted with a project for a cosmopolitan Europe. A key element in this second modernity is the civil religion of human rights that are not tied to the nation state, national identity, and which are opposed to national and ethnic reflexes". Beck draws up an indictment of Europe, pleading the case for his answer to the continent's real or imagined woes. Yet if we are to talk of special pleading, we must consider the way in which both Lyotard and Touraine hide European violence between 1848 and 1948. We can more easily appreciate Beck's game if we formally construct his argument in rhetorical fashion and contrast it with *the political innocence* of nation states or the *spiritual innocence* of historical Christianity. Varying the terms, one could speak of a political project for fostering mature juridical citizenship in the face of 19th century conflicts between religious fundamentalism and laicism. One could also speak of the Christian project of universal love in the face of dyed-in-the-wool nationalisms, and sterile ideological calls for international fraternity. It all boils down to labelling the ideas ranged on the opposing side with unflattering adjectives and outmoded "isms" to highlight the merits of one's definition of modernity. The straw men set up in the argument are denounced as outmoded, old, dead, obsolete before being artfully bowled over. However, if "cosmopolitan" liberation can only be defined in these barren confrontational terms, the second enlightenment stands every chance of sharing the

fate of the first one. Treating Europeans as mature citizens means talking about the conflict between projects rather than simply trying to enlist support by praising the virtues of modernism and reviling the vices of whatever is thrown into the other side of the balance. The questions that sociologists need to ask with regard to modernity—in particular with regard to reflective modernity (Giddens, Beck, Lash, 1994) if they are to make a real theoretical contribution to the emancipation narrative (1848)—are: (1) What was the real historic factor that modified “industrial society structured in classes and national groups”? (2) What was Marxism’s role as a “critical weapon” (Lash) (3) What was the impact of the international workers’ movement and what were the real changes to working conditions as a result of workers’ struggles? (4) What contribution was made by technology and social legislation? The questions are decisive ones because the literature of the writers discussed here rests more on a succession of academic fads of the kind slated by Braudillard than constituting a serious attempt to grapple with social reality. We all too often confuse historic agents with brilliant commentators. Lash argues that candidates to succeed Marxism might be the ethics of communal rationality of Jurgen Habermas or the persuasive analysis of Michel Foucault. Since Lash considers that neither of them are worthy of the crown, he proposes reflective modernity as a candidate. Yet why should we even bother looking for a successor to Marxism? Perhaps it is because professors are expected to pull a rabbit out of the hat every now and then or maybe it is because a new light needs to be shed on the real world. Few would disagree that the current state of advanced societies merits criticism. However, such criticism should pay more attention to the patient’s condition than to swelling the host of variations on previous diagnoses ||